

Dr. May Young, Recovering Biblical Lament

Session 3 - The Purposes of Biblical Lament, Working Through an Example, Psalms 42-43

AI Podcast Audio Overview

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So, when life really hits hard, you know, when you're just overwhelmed by suffering or pain or loss, and that future hope you're trying to cling to feels, well, just impossibly distant, what do you actually do with that, that ache deep down? Yeah, what is the go-to? It's such a universal human experience, isn't it? That struggle, that feeling that things are just fundamentally wrong, broken. Absolutely. And today, we're taking a deep dive into something ancient, but honestly, surprisingly relevant right now.

Biblical lament. We want to unpack how it actually serves as this powerful God-given tool, something to help us process the brokenness we see all around us, maybe find some healing, and even lead us toward, well, greater hope. Yeah, and our exploration today, it leans heavily on Dr. Mae Young's work, her teaching on the purposes of lament.

We'll be looking specifically at examples like Psalms 42 and 43, because, you know, we often hold on to future hope, and that's vital, absolutely essential. But we also live now in this fallen, imperfect world filled with very real suffering. Right now.

And sometimes, that future hope, it just doesn't quite provide the immediate comfort we need, you know, in the thick of the pain. Exactly. And that's precisely where lament comes in, right? It's not about just gritting your teeth and waiting for some far-off future to feel better.

No, not at all. It's more like this multifaceted way God gives us to engage with him right now, to start moving towards hope, even in the present struggle. That's it.

And Dr. Young outlines three kinds of core purposes for lament that we're going to explore today. Okay. First, simply giving voice to our pain.

Second, providing a way, an avenue to engage God directly. And third, how it actually leads us into greater hope. Okay, so let's start there.

Giving voice to pain. What's the first crucial step in that process? Where do we begin? Well, the first step towards any kind of healing, really, as the source highlights, is just acknowledging the pain, bringing it into the light. Think about it like a physical wound, right? You can't heal properly if it's hidden away.

It needs to be exposed, seen by a doctor, cleaned out. Our emotional and spiritual wounds, they're much the same. They need to be brought out, honestly, for the great physician, for God to really work on them.

It's so counterintuitive for some people, though, isn't it? Yeah. There's this common idea, maybe especially among Christians, that, you know, real faith means always being happy, always fine. Oh, absolutely.

That misconception is strong. As if putting on a happy face somehow honors God more. But what's the deeper truth there? What are we missing? Well, the overlooked truth is that silencing our pain, our doubts, actually weakens our faith.

It doesn't strengthen it. Really? It weakens it. Yeah.

The source puts it plainly. Faith is not displayed in a soul that doesn't struggle. Suffering, you see, it's this profound refining process.

It brings our real emotions, our deepest fears, those nagging doubts, right up to the surface. And we have to be honest about them if we ever want to move through them. It's in that raw honesty, that vulnerability, that faith often finds its actual strength.

So it's not just okay to feel deep emotions. It's actually biblical. Completely.

Scripture is full of examples of profound emotional display. Think about the great lamentation over Stephen's burial in Acts 8. Giving voice to suffering means giving ourselves permission to actually feel what's going on inside and express it. Yeah.

Kathleen O'Connor has that powerful quote. Oh, yeah. It's striking.

Pain kept from speech will turn and twist and tunnel into a violent, unrecognizable monster. Wow. So if we don't give voice to it, what happens? It just festers.

It festers. It warps. It definitely doesn't just vanish.

It can become destructive. And it creates that echo chamber effect in our own minds, right, where the pain just bounces around and gets louder. Exactly.

It just intensifies. Giving voice to it, bringing it out- that's what allows God to actually speak into those depths to break that cycle of just internal agony. And this isn't just like a theological idea, is it? You mentioned cognitive therapists.

No, not at all. It connects with psychology, too. Cognitive therapists like June F. Dickey have found similar principles in treating trauma.

Well, they help patients reconstruct the trauma memory, often through retelling it verbally or in writing. It's key to integrating it into their life story, their biography. And this process, as Dickey notes, helps trauma victims reclaim their narrative.

It gives them back a sense of agency. And crucially, it reduces that feeling of isolation because someone is actually hearing their story. So lament isn't passive wallowing.

It's actually an act of resistance. Yes. That's a great way to put it.

When people are suffering, they often feel incredibly powerless, voiceless. By giving voice to their pain through lament, they're reclaiming their emotions. They're refusing to let pain have the final word.

It's a really powerful, tangible act of taking back some control. Judith Herman's work on trauma touches on this, too, right? About moving forward. Absolutely.

Her work shows that grieving, actually feeling the emotions, allows survivors to move forward, even if they don't get closure from, say, perpetrators. It reaffirms their claim to moral choice in the present. It stops them from being perpetually stuck in the cycle of self-harm, resentment, shame, and depression.

And this works on a bigger scale, too, like for communities. Definitely. Lament isn't just individual.

It gives voice to an entire people in pain. Pain is incredibly isolating, right? Yeah. So, corporate lament, when a community does it together, it helps people understand those who are suffering.

It allows them to stand in solidarity. It broadens everyone's perspective. Like in the Book of Lamentations.

Exactly. It's so vivid there. You have Lady Zion crying out, "Is there any pain like my pain? And that heartbreaking refrain: there is no comforter.

It just captures that deep isolation, that need for someone to witness the pain. Kathleen O'Connor, again, saying it urges readers to. To face suffering.

To speak of it. To be dangerous proclaimers of the truth. It's a call to honesty on a communal level.

And it's not just about acknowledging suffering, or worse, normalizing injustice. It's actually a call to action. It's an invitation to make a change.

Yes. Yes. Communal lament speaks truth to injustice, to evil.

It advocates for those who are suffering. You mentioned the example of South Africa. Right.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a powerful real-world example. Those public confessions, that collective acknowledgment of pain, allowed families to begin truly grieving, to even contemplate forgiveness, and move beyond just continuing anger and hatred. Wow.

It shows how crucial it is for individuals, for communities, to stand together, acknowledge the brokenness, and actually work towards change. Exactly. So lament gives voice, individually and collectively.

But once we've brought that raw honesty out, where does it go? What do we do with it? Okay. And that brings us neatly to the second key purpose of lament. It provides an avenue to actually engage God.

Because when we're really in the thick of suffering, pain, anger, the temptation is strong to just retreat, isn't it? Oh, definitely. You know, that feeling you just want to shut down, disengage. Maybe you start doomscrolling through bad news, or you binge-watch Netflix for hours.

Anything to just numb out. Right. And James Gross' study actually backs this up.

He found that suppressing emotions, trying to numb them, it closes down relationships. It makes people disengage even more. We pull away from others, and often we pull away from God, too.

The temptation is just apathy, right? To stop caring because it hurts too much. Precisely. But biblical lament offers this really profound alternative to just checking out.

How so? Look at the psalmists. They are anything but apathetic. They fearlessly cry out to God with the full spectrum of human emotion: regret, anger, depression, confusion.

They really don't hold back. Not at all. They lean into the engagement with God.

Sometimes it feels like they're almost demanding his attention, refusing to be ignored. And this is where it gets really interesting. Because it's more than just venting, isn't it? It's described as an act of faith.

Exactly. That's the key distinction. Lament is more than just pouring out feelings.

It's a profound act of faith because we're choosing to turn to God instead of turning away from him. It's a deliberate choice. It demonstrates that we're not alienating ourselves, even though, as you said, that's often the strongest temptation when we're really struggling.

So it's like an invitation, inviting God right into the middle of our struggle, our pain, even our doubts. Yes. Just like Job.

Remember his story. He engaged God directly in his overwhelming distress. His wife's advice was basically just to give up, curse God, and die.

But Job refused. He kept talking to God. And what's the significance of that? That direct, maybe even messy, approach? The significance is huge.

It means we can come to God vulnerably, exactly as we are, without any pretense. We can acknowledge our weaknesses, pour out our needs honestly. Because Jesus, as our high priest, understands.

Precisely. Hebrews tells us he sympathizes with our weaknesses. He assures us we can come boldly, that we don't have to carry these burdens all alone.

It's this incredible act of honesty with the one who knows us completely. And it's an act of faith because it's rooted in who God is. Yes.

It's predicated on God's character, his power, his love, his justice. We approach him, even in our lament, believing he can make a change in the situation. Especially when we feel totally powerless, maybe against huge injustice or evil.

Exactly then. Lament trusts God enough to cry out, knowing he can actually do something. As Dr. Young points out, some evils are so appalling that only the infinite goodness and power of God can bring about their ultimate defeat.

We're acknowledging our limits and his limitlessness. And engaging God this way, through lament, leads to deep communion. What does that mean? It means our personal pain, our cries for justice, get connected to God's larger story, his redemptive work in the world.

We're actually participating, in a way, in his ultimate plan when we pray those honest prayers, like, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, even from a place of pain. OK, so we voice the pain; we engage God directly. And this process, it doesn't just leave us there.

It leads somewhere. Right. And this engagement with God, it isn't just about processing the pain.

It's the very pathway that ultimately leads us toward hope, which is the third purpose. So the goal isn't to just sort of wallow in the pain. Or get stuck in depression.

Definitely not. On the contrary, actually, the whole point is to lead us into greater hope. How does it do that? It positions us in what the source calls the posture of waiting and anticipating God's response and work.

We're asking God to step in precisely because the situation is beyond our own strength. We're looking to him. It's really striking how often people testify to finding the deepest joy, the closest connection to God during times of intense suffering.

It is, isn't it? The source mentions a student who went through a really isolating illness and found this deep joy with the Lord. Yeah, her quote was powerful. When you feel like you hit rock bottom, you're actually standing on the rock, which is the Lord.

Exactly. What does that tell us? It tells us that in our darkest moments, God's presence can become incredibly tangibly real. It can fill the heart with an intimacy and even joy that just doesn't make sense based on the circumstances alone.

And this waiting we do in lament, it's not passive, right? It's not just sitting around hoping things get better. No, it's crucial to understand it's an active expectation. It's based on who God is, his character, his faithfulness shown in the past.

OK. It's this hopeful willingness to surrender ourselves, our circumstances, trusting him. It fosters active expectation, not cynicism.

Henry Noon talks about this kind of hope. Yes, he puts it beautifully. Hope is willing to leave unanswered questions, unanswered and unknown futures.

Unknown hope makes you see God's guiding hand not only in the gentle and pleasant moments, but also in the shadows of disappointment and darkness. Hmm. That's powerful.

So how does this all look? Practically, let's dig into that example from Psalms 42 and 43. They deal with loneliness and abandonment, which feels incredibly relevant. It really does.

It's actually quite staggering how common loneliness is. That 2021 Harvard study you mentioned: 36 percent of Americans feel serious loneliness, plus another 37 percent feel it occasionally. That's three-quarters of the population feeling lonely sometimes or often.

It's huge. And it cuts across all demographics. Honestly, if you live long enough, chances are you will face seasons of loneliness.

Even Jesus did. Right. His disciples scattered, abandoning him at the cross.

Yeah. And Psalms 42 and 43, they're often read together. Yes, they're widely seen as a single unit.

They share themes and, crucially, that repeated refrain. They give such powerful voice to feelings of loneliness and abandonment, not just by people, but sometimes that feeling of being abandoned by God himself. Prompting those hard questions like, where is your God? Exactly.

And their general nature makes them so applicable. Whatever circumstance is causing the loneliness or despair. They really give us a kind of roadmap for lament.

OK, so let's walk through the elements of lament we see in these psalms. What's the first one? Right. So the first element is the address or invocation.

The psalmist calls out directly to God, and that famous image is the deer panting for streams of water. Yeah, we often picture that as peaceful, serene. But the reality is quite different.

It's a picture of utter desperation. Think of a deer overheating, exhausted, maybe hunted. It's life and death.

Wow. So it expresses this profound loneliness, pain, abandonment, weakness, despair. This intense, desperate longing for God's presence.

OK, so starting with that raw cry, then it moves into the lamentation, petition, and complaint part. Yes. And what's fascinating here is the realism.

The source calls it an alternation between despair and hope. It shows lament isn't this neat, linear climb upwards. It's a messy process.

Back and forth. Exactly. The psalmist mourns his past experiences being in the temple with the community and contrasts it sharply with his current isolation.

He says, "Tears have been my food day and night. That's such a visceral image. It really is.

And this is where that famous refrain comes in, where he's actually talking to himself, to his own soul. Right. Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my savior and my God.

He repeats that. It's like this internal battle, speaking truth to his own feelings of despair. And the imagery he uses for his suffering is intense too.

Oh, incredibly. Deep calls to deepen the roar of your waterfalls. All your waves and breakers have swept over me.

It's this picture of being completely overwhelmed by sorrow, like you have no footing. You can't breathe. It even suggests the physical effects of deep emotional pain.

And he doesn't shy away from it. No, he faces it head-on, right there in God's presence. He brings the rawness.

And he directly challenges God too, asking why he feels forgotten, why he's suffering under oppression. Yes. Feeling the absence of God, the lack of an advocate, even more acutely because he's isolated.

He cries out. My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all the day long, where's your God? That question must have stunk so deeply. Yeah.

And he pleads for God to act. He does. He asks God, vindicate me, oh my God, and plead my cause.

He's looking for deliverance, for God's light and truth to lead him back to God's presence, because he knows that's where true peace is ultimately found. OK, so that's the lament and petition. What's the third element? Yeah.

Motivations. Right. Even in the middle of all this pain and questioning, the psalmist does something crucial.

He appeals to God's character. He reminds himself and God that God is just, that he is able to vindicate. And he appeals to their relationship.

Yes. His intimate past relationship with God. He keeps calling him my rock, my stronghold, my salvation, my exceeding joy.

This is so important. Even while drowning in doubt, he remembers in the dark what he's seen in the light. He doesn't just throw away everything he knows to be true about God because of his current feelings.

That's a really key discipline, isn't it? Remembering truth even when feelings scream otherwise. Absolutely vital. And that leads right into the fourth element.

The confession of trust or assurance of being heard. Which is most obvious in that refrain again. Exactly.

Put your hope in God. The psalmist literally commands his own soul. The verb is an imperative to hope and wait on God.

He's actively encouraging himself with truth, pushing back against that downward spiral of hopelessness and abandonment. So what does that act of waiting look like for us if we're feeling that way right now? Well, it means putting faith into action, even in small ways. The source gives some practical ideas, almost like the spiritual equivalent of just getting up and moving.

Like wash your face, put on your clothes, go out for a walk, call that friend, serve in that ministry. Basically, putting your eyes forward, engaging with life and others, even while you're still in the midst of your own pain. It's a conscious choice to act in expectation, not just wait passively for feelings to magically change.

Precisely. You're directing your soul towards God's character and faithfulness, trusting he will act even if you don't see it yet. Okay.

And the final element in these psalms? The vow of praise. We see it clearly in Psalm 43, verse 4. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

So looking forward in hope. Yes. It's this future-oriented expectation.

It's predicated on his belief that God will send his light and truth to guide him. But interestingly, the psalm doesn't end there. It ends with the refrain one last time.

Right. Why, my soul, are you downcast? Put your hope in God. Yeah.

It's such a realistic touch. It reminds us that our emotions are fickle. We have to keep speaking truth to our souls, keep choosing hope, keep commanding ourselves to trust because the feelings of despair can creep back in.

It's an ongoing practice. So really embracing biblical lament, it's not just about understanding a concept. It's a spiritual practice.

Absolutely. It's a practice that profoundly shapes how we engage with uncertainty, with suffering. It's a necessary part of grieving, a necessary part of healing.

It teaches us we don't have to just ignore or suppress the hardest parts of life. We can bring them to God. And it's unique, isn't it, compared to maybe other ancient practices? Yes.

That's a key point. While other cultures had forms of lament, biblical lament is unique because it's directed towards a God who knows, who cares, and who ultimately acts on behalf of his people. It's relational.

And it's not just for individuals. It can be corporate, something a community does together. Yes.

Standing together in shared pain, share hope. And it's multifaceted, not just one emotion like sadness, but this whole spectrum of honest interaction with God. So lament isn't, it's not a magic wand.

Definitely not. The source is clear. It's not a silver bullet that instantly resolves all our problems.

But it does help us move forward. It helps us move from despair towards greater resilience and hope. Even when God doesn't intervene in the way we might want or expect, like with irreversible loss or Paul's famous thorn in the flesh.

Exactly. Even in those situations where the circumstance doesn't change, lament still draws us closer to him. It becomes a channel for receiving the grace and strength that we need each day.

It reminds us that our ultimate hope isn't solely found in things changing here and now. So ultimately, lament helps us realize that maybe what we needed most wasn't a change in circumstances, but him. That's the deepest truth, I think.

It helps us realize that what we truly need is him. And that realization leads to greater intimacy, greater hope, a hope that isn't ultimately defeated by our circumstances because it's anchored in God himself. So we've really unpacked how biblical lament is this powerful, multifaceted tool.

It lets us give voice to our pain, engage God authentically, even in the struggle. And ultimately, it points us towards a deeper, more resilient hope. Even right in the middle of life's toughest times.

So maybe a final thought for you listening. Consider this. What unspoken pain or emotion might you be holding on to right now? What kind of transformative potential might be waiting if you were to give it voice through this ancient but incredibly relevant practice of lament?