

Introduction to Biblical Lament

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. May Young introduces the biblical practice of lament, emphasizing that it is an active act of faith rather than mere sorrow or self-pity. Rather than suppressing painful emotions—which causes severe physical, psychological, and relational harm—believers are encouraged to bring their honest grief, questions, and complaints directly to God. The lecture examines the genre and structural elements of both individual and corporate laments in Scripture, highlighting how turning to God in suffering ultimately leads from grief to trust and praise.

Outline

I. Introduction to Biblical Lament

- A. Speaker Introduction: Dr. May Young (Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Taylor University)
- B. Context: Processing pain, injustice, depression, and suffering in a broken world
- C. Common Unhealthy Responses to Pain
 - 1. Ignoring and hoping pain vanishes
 - 2. Distracting or busying oneself
 - 3. Pretending everything is fine
 - 4. Numbing through self-destructive habits (e.g., alcohol, drugs)
- D. Motivation for Teaching and Writing
 - 1. Author of *Walking with God Through the Valley* (InterVarsity Academic Press)
 - 2. Lack of church teaching on lament during upbringing
 - 3. Modern relevance amplified by pandemic, war, and global tragedy

II. Defining Biblical Lament

- A. Beyond Mere Emotional Expression
 - 1. Difference from general sadness or wallowing
 - 2. Biblical lament as an active act of faith
- B. Core Functions of Lament
 - 1. Honestly crying out to God with suffering, injustice, and anger
 - 2. Inviting God into the struggle
 - 3. Building spiritual resilience and leading to hope and healing

C. Biblical Foundations and Scope

1. Psalms: One-third of the Psalter consists of laments
2. Book of Job: Personal expressions of lament amid suffering
3. Prophetic Literature: Laments over national sin, injustice, and judgment
4. Book of Lamentations: Reflection on the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC
5. New Testament: Jesus's cry from the cross quoting Psalm 22

III. Biblical Lament as a Literary Genre

A. Definition and Importance of Literary Genre

1. Category of artistic/literary composition with distinct style, form, and content
2. Contextual understanding ensures correct interpretation of Scripture

B. Form-Critical Analysis (Hermann Gunkel, 1926)

1. Identification of coherent patterns, structures, and setting in life (Sitz im Leben)
2. Four main categories: Praise/Hymns, Thanksgiving, Individual Laments, Corporate/Communal Laments

C. Characteristics of Genre Determination

1. Common thoughts, moods, and settings
2. Overlapping features across categories (genres are not rigid or cookie-cutter)

D. Pedagogical Function

1. Functions like the Lord's Prayer—provides a structural pattern for prayer
2. Can be recited as written or personalized for specific trials

IV. Individual Laments

A. Overview and Scope

1. Express individual grief, sorrow, sickness, or pain
2. Approximately 39 individual laments in the Book of Psalms
3. Predominant use of first-person singular pronouns ("I", "me")
4. Expressed in general terms to allow personal application to physical, spiritual, or emotional trials

B. Five Structural Elements of Individual Lament

1. Address / Invocation: Simple turning to God (e.g., calling on Yahweh, Elohim, Rock, Savior)
2. Lamentation / Petition / Complaint: Honest expression of struggle, self-reflection, assertion of innocence, or confession of sin
3. Motivations: Providing reasons for God to act based on His character and covenant
4. Confession of Trust / Assurance of Being Heard:
 - a. Shift from grief to hope (vav adversative: "but", "now")
 - b. Not present in all laments (e.g., Psalm 88 remains dark)
 - c. Initiated through various means (past deliverance, Scripture, divine encouragement)
5. Vow of Praise: Promise to praise God following assurance or deliverance

V. The Psychological, Physical, and Relational Necessity of Expressing Pain

A. Psychological Harm of Emotional Suppression

1. Bottling up emotions increases aggression (study in Social Psychological and Personality Science)
2. "Feel it to heal it": Need to bring pain into conscious awareness
3. Suppressed anger leads to displaced explosive outbursts (e.g., road rage, taking anger out on children)
4. Anne Lamott quote (Traveling Mercies): Only direct experience of grieving heals grief

B. Physical Health Consequences

1. Chronic emotional inhibition leads to heightened physiological reactivity and disease vulnerability
2. 2013 Harvard / University of Rochester Study: Suppressing emotions increases premature death risk by >30% and cancer risk by 70%

C. Relational and Spiritual Impact

1. Suppressing emotions shuts down relational communication (James Gross, Stanford University)
2. Alienation from God when pain is hidden or suppressed
3. False expectation of stoicism (Spock model vs. authentic biblical honesty)

VI. Clarifying Misconceptions About Biblical Lament

A. Lament is Not Self-Pity

1. Klaus Westermann: No psalm of lament stops at lamentation; goal is removal of suffering
2. Based on God's promises, seeking transformation rather than wallowing

B. Lament is Not a Failure of Faith

1. Church culture often promotes "triumphalism" and superficial victory testimonies
2. Pressure to appear strong leads to fear of judgment, isolation, and spiritual deconstruction
3. Lament validates suffering as a normal aspect of the Christian walk

C. Complaining vs. Grumbling

1. One-third of lament psalms contain complaints directed to God (e.g., "Why do you hide your face?")
2. Distinction: Wilderness generation grumbled about God to each other (unbelief); psalmists and Job brought complaints directly to God in prayer (act of faith)
3. Expressing honest grievances directly to God fosters covenantal intimacy

VII. Communal / Corporate Laments

A. Definition and Setting

1. Collective prayers during national crises, natural disasters, or military defeats
2. Approximately 12 to 23 communal laments in the Psalter
3. Use of first-person plural pronouns ("we", "us", "our") and second-person singular forms to God

B. Key Structural Features

1. Direct address to God
2. Accusatory statements or urgent questions
3. Lamentation over shared community misfortune
4. Petitions for divine intervention
5. Rehearsal of God's redemptive history as motivation for action

C. The Church's Calling to Corporate Lament

1. Universal nature of suffering (Swedish proverb: "Shared joy is double joy, shared sorrow is half sorrow")
2. 1 Corinthians 12:26: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it"
3. Failure of the modern church to weep with those who weep and hold space for hurting people
4. Call to presence ministry: Sitting in uncertainty, listening, and offering compassionate fellowship