

Purposes of Biblical Lament: Working Through an Example – Ps. 42–43

Author: Dr. May Young | Session 3

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. May Young explores the multifaceted purposes of biblical lament as a gracious tool for believers processing the brokenness of living in a fallen world. She highlights three core functions of lament: giving voice to individual and corporate pain, providing an active avenue to engage God in faith, and ultimately leading sufferers into deeper hope. Through a detailed analysis of Psalms 42 and 43, Dr. Young illustrates how moving honestly through non-linear cycles of despair and hope—coupled with the intentional command to speak truth to one's own soul—transforms isolation and powerlessness into active expectation of God's redemptive presence.

Outline

I. Introduction and Context of Living in a Fallen World

- A. The tension between future eschatological hope and present earthly suffering
- B. Biblical lament as a gracious tool provided by God to process brokenness
- C. Transitioning from passive waiting to active, honest engagement with God in the present

II. Three Primary Purposes of Biblical Lament

A. Purpose 1: Giving Voice to Pain

1. Individual Healing and Vulnerability

- a. Emotional acknowledgment as the necessary first step toward healing (medical analogy)
- b. Refuting the misconception that spirituality requires suppressing pain or forced happiness
- c. The therapeutic power of verbal and written narrative retelling in trauma processing
- d. Reclaiming agency and voice: lament as an act of moral resistance against powerlessness

2. Corporate and Communal Pain

- a. Breaking the isolation of suffering by standing in solidarity with others
- b. Biblical precedent from Lamentations 1: Lady Zion's cry for a witness and comforter
- c. Refusing to normalize systemic injustice and evil by speaking communal truth
- d. Communal lament as an invitation to repentance, reconciliation, and societal transformation

B. Purpose 2: Providing an Avenue to Engage God

- 1. Countering emotional suppression, apathy, and isolation
- 2. Turning toward God in faith rather than retreating into passive disengagement

3. Approaching God with raw authenticity, modeled after Job, Psalms, and Jesus as High Priest
4. Engaging God's sovereign power and loving character to address appallingly complex evil

C. Purpose 3: Leading Sufferers into Greater Hope

1. Avoiding self-absorbed despair while waiting in active expectation for God's response
2. Experiencing deep communion and divine intimacy during dark seasons of trial
3. Defining active waiting as confident surrender to God's character rather than cynicism
4. Practical step-by-step obedience and faithful living amidst unresolved circumstances

III. Case Study: Lament, Loneliness, and Abandonment in Psalms 42 and 43

A. Prevalence and Ubiquity of Loneliness

1. Statistical pervasive reality of loneliness across all demographic groups
2. Christ's own experience of abandonment during His trial and crucifixion

B. Structural Unity and Setting of Psalms 42–43

1. Shared themes, identical refrains, and ancient manuscript unity
2. Universal applicability derived from the general nature of the psalmist's crisis

C. Detailed Exegesis of the Five Elements of Lament in Psalms 42–43

1. Address / Invocation (Ps. 42:1–2)
 - a. Direct appeal to Elohim (characteristic of Book 2 of the Psalter)
 - b. The deer panting for streams: a visceral picture of life-or-death desperation
2. Lamentation, Petition, and Complaint (Ps. 42:2–11; 43:1–3)
 - a. Non-linear alternation between despair and hope throughout the process
 - b. Visceral imagery: tears as food, deep calling unto deep, and drowning under surging waves
 - c. Enemy taunts asking "Where is your God?" compounding spiritual isolation
 - d. Petition for a divine advocate, light, and truth to guide back to God's presence
3. Motivations for God to Act
 - a. Appealing to God as Rock, Stronghold, and personal Savior
 - b. Remembering past communal worship in dark moments when vision is clouded
4. Confession of Trust and Assurance of Being Heard
 - a. The recurring refrain: "Why, my soul, are you downcast? ... Put your hope in God"
 - b. The grammatical imperative: commanding one's soul to hope and wait on God
 - c. Translating spiritual command into daily steps of faithful, hopeful action
5. Vow of Praise (Ps. 43:4–5)
 - a. Anticipating future joyful worship at the altar of God
 - b. Conclusion on the repeated refrain, highlighting ongoing spiritual processing

IV. Concluding Applications and Spiritual Principles

- A. Lament as an essential, scripture-grounded practice for emotional and spiritual health
- B. Distinction between biblical lament (appealing to a caring God) and pagan lament

- C. Recognizing lament as a multifaceted process rather than a quick, uniform fix
- D. Trusting God's sufficient grace when life's circumstances remain unalterable