

How to Lament

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[0 : 01] Well, can I add my greeting to you? Happy New Year! This is the first sermon of the new year and so it's appropriate that we wish each other Happy New Year.

But our reading is Psalm 79. Maybe I got it wrong somewhere. Maybe the reading should be a little bit cheery if we're wishing Happy New Year.

Where's Happy in Psalm 79? It's not a happy psalm. Did I mess it up somehow?

But actually, the new year isn't all happy, is it? Already we know that. But sadly, there are many things in our world that mean that the new year isn't all happy and isn't going to be all happy.

As we look at our communities and our world, we see wars and famines and floods and fires and earthquakes and refugees and costs of living and road tolls and...

[1 : 25] And on a personal level, there are things that aren't so great. Also, there is ill health, fractured relationships, bereavements, unemployment, job insecurity, what seems like failures.

There are heartaches and disappointments. Even small little things can rob us of happiness.

We stub our toe. We can't find a parking spot. We run to the bus or the train in the pouring rain only to miss it by a whisker.

And then when the next one comes, we're crammed up against somebody who smells like last week's pizza wrapped in old socks. And it's not good. We're late.

We're tired. We're hungry. We're even angry. You know what it's like. I'm not being a pessimist. I'm just saying that these things are real.

[2 : 32] It's not all happiness and smiles. And we don't need to be reminded of it.

We know it. We'd prefer not to be reminded of it actually often. But reality is, we are going to be touched by some of these things in the coming year.

And some of us already are. We're carrying, some of us, sorrows from the previous year into this year. So what do we do?

Well, the first reaction, if you're like me, is to complain. Have a good whinge. Find somebody. But actually, who do you complain to?

And if we take it logically, as Christian people, the people who believe in an all-powerful, almighty God, the only one to complain to is God.

[3 : 36] And so is that what this psalm is? Just a God-centered whinge? Well, it is complaint, but I think it's much more than that.

It's something much more, I think, hopeful and helpful than just a complaint. So let's dig into it. I've divided up this psalm into three sections, as you'll see.

And I think that each of these sections has three actors mentioned in it. There is God, there are God's people, and what's termed the nations, that is the people who don't know God, in each of these three sections.

And we are introduced to all three parties in the first section. And even in verse 1, all three come into focus.

Could we have verse 1? Thank you. Let's look at it. The nations, it seems, have assaulted God. And notice how, in this verse, as we read it, it's all against God.

[5 : 01] The nations have invaded your inheritance. They have defiled your holy temple. They have reduced Jerusalem, which is God's city, to rubble.

They have left the dead bodies of your servants as food for the birds of the sky. The flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.

The nations, the people who don't acknowledge God, have acted against God.

They're not just not regarding him, they are actively attacking him. And as the psalmist was writing this, he didn't just pick, you know, four random things about God, but these are things that are all focuses, foci, of God's promises.

In his inheritance, Deuteronomy 4.20 says, but as for you, the Lord took you and brought you out of the iron smelting furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance as you now are.

[6 : 18] This is a promise from God that they will be his inheritance. What about the Holy Temple? In 2 Chronicles, when Solomon has built the temple and God speaks to him, and the Lord appeared to him at night and said, I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.

It is God's holy temple. Again, the servants, in the servant songs of Isaiah, we get Israel referred to time and time as the servant of God.

In Isaiah 41, for example, in verses 8 and 9, but you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham, my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from the farthest corners, I called you, I said, you are my servant.

We might have a slide for that. I have chosen you and have not rejected you. Israel is God's servant.

And similarly, they are his people. It's God's people who have been slaughtered here. These are the people who God said of in Exodus chapter 19, now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession.

[8 : 05] although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Do you see what's happening here?

What the psalmist is doing is making a complaint not just about the bad things that are happening to us, but it's taking the reality of what is happening and putting it in the context of God's promises.

And I think that that's what the essence of lament really is. This lament psalm is an example.

A lament is taking the reality of what's happening, seeing all the ugly reality, as it often is, and putting it in the context of what we know about God, what God's revealed about himself, what he has promised that he will do.

and it's appealing to God on the basis of his promises. So when the psalmist appeals to God, he's not just saying, if you will act, if you want to act.

[9 : 22] In verse five, he says, no, how long all those terrible and graphic things that have happened to God's people are an offense against God.

God will act. The only question is, how long? How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire?

So you see, this isn't just cynical complaining. the cynic accepts that things aren't going to change. But no, this is faith-filled statement of reality and bringing it to God, believing that God can and will change things.

The only question here is how long it will be. So as he brings these things to God, he also, in the next section, asks for God to act justly, restore things how they should be, restore justice.

And so he says, pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you. on the kingdoms that do not call on your name, for they have devoured Jacob and devastated his homeland.

[10 : 55] He's calling down justice because he knows that that's how God acts. He knows what God has promised and he asks God to make it right again.

God is that we suddenly realise that we are among those wrongdoers.

If I ask God to punish all the sinners in the world, whoops, maybe not all of them, but because the Bible says, in Romans 3, it says, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

I have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We all are guilty and deserve punishment.

And the psalmist realised that and understood that the current predicament of God's people was a punishment for them sinfully turning their back on God.

[12 : 24] So he appeals to God not only to judge, but also to save, to be a saviour of his people, do not hold against us the sins of the past generations.

In verse 8, may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need. Help us, God our saviour, for the glory of your name.

Deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake. We, as God's people today, can make that appeal so much more confidently.

because we know that God has made a way for forgiveness of sins through Jesus. We who have put our faith in Jesus know that our sins can be forgiven.

We can pray this prayer with confidence, but we still need it with the same desperate need as the psalmist talks about.

[13 : 30] And I love the way that this is asked for, for God's glory. Did you notice that? God forgives our sin, not just so that we are clean, not just so that we enjoy things, it's to glorify himself. me, even in my sinful state, when God forgives me in Jesus, it glorifies him.

Isn't that great? That God can take something as terrible as sin, my turning away from him, and make it an object for his glory. That is fantastic.

fantastic. That's something to thank him for. That's something to praise him for. Because he has and does forgive sin.

God's in the business of forgiving sin. Jesus came for that purpose. In the last four verses of the psalm, verses 10 to 13, we see the reversal that the psalmist has called for happening for all the three actors.

[14 : 57] For the nations, for God's people, and for God himself. For the nations, they taunt God, and they taunt God's people.

Verse 10, then why should the nations say, where is their God? They're taunting God's people. They're believing in a God, and we've beaten them.

They're taunting God himself. Where is he? And they physically attack God's people. That's what it's been very, it is very graphically set out in the whole of this psalm, how they've been killing and slaughtering and making a mess of God's people and his place.

They hurl contempt at God himself, verse 12 says. The contempt they have hurled at the Lord. But when God acts, they will be avenged by God, that his people will be avenged.

So, verse 10, before our eyes make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants, and the contempt that they show to God comes back to them seven fold.

[16 : 32] Verse 12, pay back into the laps of our neighbours seven times the contempt they have hurled at you. And for God's people, the reversal is there.

Notice how they are, in verse 11, groaning prisoners. They are people condemned to die.

And yet, they turn around and they'll be the ones in verse 13 who praise his name. Then we, your people, the sheep of your pastor, will praise your name forever.

From generation to generation, we will proclaim your praise. What a reversal when God acts. And God, he's been taunted and held in contempt, held in contempt.

temptation to temptation to tempt. But when he acts, he restores justice and he is praised. His name is glorified where it has been vilified.

[17 : 45] God. Everything changes when God acts. And of course, we know that God has acted in Jesus in the most powerful way.

We've just celebrated the coming of Jesus at Christmas. cross. And of course, we will in a few months celebrate again the action of Jesus on the cross.

We remember it each time we take communion. We are continually reminded that God has acted. and so we, his people, need to praise him and praise him forever.

Well, we've said that laments are presenting the sometimes very ugly reality before God.

Just highlighting what's really happening and appealing to his promises, appealing to him to act. And so this isn't sugar-coated faith.

[19 : 08] It's not dressing it up to be anything other than what it really is. It's gritty reality bringing that before God and who we know him to be.

But it does imply that we as God's people need to really know who God is, really need to know what he has promised, what he has revealed to himself, of himself.

We need to be aware of what the Bible does and doesn't say. Lament is a good reason to study your Bible.

And of course, lament prayers are continued outside the Psalms. The Psalms aren't the only play. In fact, we have a book in the Bible called Lamentations.

Not one we read very often, but it's there. And there are lament prayers throughout the Bible. Even in the New Testament, many of the prayers of Jesus are prayers of lament.

[20 : 24] Many of the prayers of the early church are prayers of lament, bringing the reality of what we're going through into the sphere of God's promises.

promises. That the last book of the New Testament is a book that talks about the reality of the suffering of God's people, and yet it talks about the promises of what God's going to do.

It's in effect one big lament if you read it that way. And right at the very end, in the last couple of chapters, there is a description of what's going to happen, of where we're heading to.

And let me just read from Revelation chapter 21. Just a few verses here. And then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea, and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.

[21 : 46] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

That's where it's all going to. That's where we're heading. That's the promise of God. And so no wonder at the very end of the next chapter, right, the second last verse in the whole Bible.

He who testifies these things says, yes, I'm coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. That's the prayer of a lament.

How long? And of course, the answer to how long is until the return of Jesus.

[23 : 06] And so we continue to pray. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen. But what about those things I mentioned at the start?

All those wars and nasty things and stubbing our toes and things? Well, we can bring them to him in prayer, not as complaints, but as presentations of our reality.

This is what's really going on with me, God. And place those in the light of his promises. And we who have accepted Jesus as our king can bring everything to him, knowing that he hears and confident in what he has promised.

For example, when we hear of the global conflicts and we hear a lot about them these days, we can pray for God's provision for his people in the midst of that and his presence with them because he's promised that while at the same time looking forward to his coming kingdom where there will be no more death, no more mourning, no more crying or pain.

On Christmas Eve, just a couple of weeks ago, hordes of heavily armed Muslim militants attacked the largely Christian villages in the state where we used to live in Nigeria.

[24 : 49] Their stated aim is to drive out the indigenous tribes and claim the state for themselves by the 15th of January. So this thing is still going on and their method is to attack at night.

They come at night shooting their automatic weapons, burning houses, looting property, shooting anybody who tries to run away, and they have claimed a lot of land already and they're still doing that.

And the government does nothing and the army does nothing and the police cannot do anything. And that's the reality.

The government does and that sort of thing is happening not just in Nigeria but lots of different places. We just don't hear about it very much.

But this is real for God's people and what can we do? We can bring it to God. This is the reality, God.

[26 : 03] So can we pray for them that God would stay the hand of wicked people, that he would protect and comfort his people, that he would provide for them and that Christian people would remain steadfast in their faith.

In the tightening economic circumstances, especially if we have trouble finding work or big expenses come up, we can bring those to God.

Knowing Jesus' promise that God knows and will provide everything we need. Do you remember in Matthew 6 where he compared us to the birds of the air?

He said, God knows their needs. Don't you think he knows yours? And won't you be much better provided for than the birds?

God's promised that we can bring our needs to him. When we have big personal things in our lives like illnesses or bereavements, we can bring those things to God.

[27 : 21] Nothing's too big or too scary for God. We're not going to put God off by telling him the reality of our lives. We're not disrespecting him when we do that.

He's promised his presence and his comfort and we can know ultimate security and assurance of our forever home with God in heaven because of Christ.

We can bring those things to him. Even the small annoyances like the missed car park or the smelly fellow traveler or the cut finger or the sunken cake or whatever it is, we can bring those things to God.

We can know who we are before him and he cares for us. He's told us he cares about all those things.

Our second reading contained these verses. Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

[28 : 50] happiness. So we this new year we aren't guaranteed happiness but we are exhorted to rejoice because God is king.

He does act and everything changes when God acts. Let us learn to present reality to him, appeal to his promises, appeal to him to act.

Let me pray for us. Lord God, our heavenly father, you are mighty and you are good. You are the king of the universe. You are the almighty God.

and we are humbled before you and yet you are also the God who loves us, who reaches out to us in grace and mercy and cares about every little detail of our lives.

You know our reality. Help us to be people who bring it to you, confident in what you have revealed about yourself and what you have said you will do.

[30 : 15] And may you grow us more and more like the Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen.