

Lamenting the Loss of Lament

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- [0 : 00] Well, friends, how about we pray? Father, we thank you for your word. We pray tonight that as we look at this psalm, you would help us understand it and understanding it.
- You'd help us to live rightly in response to it. And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Just a number of years ago, a whole lot of Christians from all around the world marked a particular anniversary.
- And what it was was the 75th anniversary of the conversion of a man who called himself the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.
- His name, of course, was Clive Staples Lewis. And C.S. Lewis wrote two books about this conversion. And the two books that are about his conversion are Surprised by Joy and The Pilgrim's Progress.
- Sorry, The Pilgrim's Regress. And in each of those books, Lewis recounts the search for what he calls joy. And he tells the story of how that search ultimately led him to God.
- [1 : 05] And at the end of Surprised by Joy, he calls the search for joy a signpost on the road that leads to God. A signpost on the road that leads to God.
- The longing for joy that he feels is ultimately fulfilled alone in God. Now, as I reflect on the conversion of Lewis, it's clear to me that his longing is a very, very common one.
- We all long for happiness, don't we? You can see it in our advertisements. You look at any series of advertisements. If you go home tonight, watch a bit of TV, and you don't skip through the advertisements, you'll see we are longing for happiness.
- In our movies, you see it. In our media, you see it. In our language, you see it. In the self-help shelves of our bookshops, we see it.
- We long for that mysterious state of blessedness where everything we find difficult will be sorted out. Where everything we long for and desire will be fulfilled.
- [2 : 17] And where our whole existence will be saturated with contentment. That is what we want, isn't it? We want to be content. We want that state of happiness or blessedness.
- And it is a common human desire. I have it. You have it. In fact, and it is regularly addressed in the Psalms, in fact, the very first word in the book of Psalms is the word for happiness or blessedness.
- The psalmist says, How blessed are those who... So that's how you start off a book of songs. How blessed are those who...
- And like C.S. Lewis, the book of Psalms clearly connects our longing for the state of blessedness with a longing for God. And all those who know God and who experience this...
- All those who know God experience that same sense, that same desire, that same longing for blessedness that the psalmist had. They know with Lewis and they know with the psalmist that happiness, that blessedness is tied up with God.
- [3 : 30] If you're a Christian, you in the end know that. And you long for God. And you cry out for God. And your deepest yearning is for God and His company.

The heartfelt lust of the Christian is for the presence of God. Friends, this afternoon or this evening, I want to explore this theme by focusing just on one psalm, this psalm that we've got in front of us tonight, Psalm 27.

And I want you to turn with me just on that piece of paper you've got there, because that's the version I'm going to be using tonight. And I want to say that this Bible talk tonight is not like my usual ones.

That is, it's not a sort of systematic working through a passage. It is more a personal exploration. I want you to come on a journey with me in one sense about my own Christian life.

And I hope that you will come with me and reflect with me. And I hope that my personal reflection tonight will find some resonance with you.

[4 : 29] That is, I hope as I'd let you a bit into my life that you will say, oh yes, there's some of that in my life as well. Friends, my own Christian life began very spectacularly.

I was 18 and I was dramatically converted. It was a very spectacular conversion. I changed overnight. I can remember the day. I can remember what happened.

I can remember the change I felt in the morning. And the intimacy that I experienced with God was intense and close. I want to tell you today though, that as time has gone on, that intimacy has lessened.

The desire for intimacy has not. I had the same desire for intimacy with God that I had when I was 18 and I had been converted. The longing for God has not disappeared.

I long for God more than I long for anything else. But the intimacy that I had with God has somewhat lessened. And so this talk that I'm giving tonight represents for me a somewhat personal reflection on Psalm 27.

[5 : 40] So I hope you'll come with me. I offer it to you tonight because it allows me to explore with you a theme that I think has been neglected amongst Christians.

And it allows me to practice what I'm preaching. So it's a bit more personal than my usual sermon. So I hope you'll come with me and take it in that sort of spirit. So let's get underway by looking at this psalm.

And the first thing I want you to notice about this psalm is that there are two or three thoughts that repeat themselves throughout it. Have a look at verse 3. I want you to notice the word confident.

Though an army deploys against me, my heart is not afraid. Though war breaks out against me, still I am confident. Now I want you to look at verse 13.

And the note of confidence is still there. I am certain that I will see the Lord's goodness in the land of the living. Our psalmist, you see, begins his psalm with confidence.

[6 : 39] And he ends his psalm with confidence. And this is the overwhelming feeling that he has when he faces life. He is confident that the God he has come to know is for him and that will be realized in his life.

But I want you to notice that between those two expressions of confidence brackets some other common words. Have a look at them there. Have a look at verse 4. David uses the word desire.

I have asked one thing from the Lord and this is what I desire. to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. Gazing on the beauty of the Lord and seeking him in his temple.

Can you see what David's wanting here? His most intense desire is for God and he seeks after God and he longs for God and God's presence.

His overwhelming desire is to be in the presence of God and gazing upon his beauty. Now look at verse 8. Now David talks about seeking.

[7 : 46] He says, My heart says this about you. You are to seek my face. Lord, I will seek your face.

You see, so the psalm starts with confidence. It ends with confidence and between those two statements of confidence there are statements about David seeking God. Now I want you to notice something about the structure of the psalm.

You see, Psalm 27 falls into two clear sections. It contains two common genres, two common psalm genres. Verses 1 to 6 are a song of praise and what they do is they say to God, You are so great for what you have done.

They praise God for who he is and for what he has done. They praise him confidently about his future acts. They say, I know you are going to do this for you are God.

But verses 7 to 14 are not a song of praise. They are a lament. The tone is one of God, you have deserted me and one of protest against God.

[8 : 54] Why is this the case? You see, in the second half of the psalm, things are no longer good. God no longer appears near and present.

That intimacy that he had with God is now something he desires but apparently does not have. David worries that God has actually hidden his face from him and that he's rejected or forsaken him.

But both the song of praise and the lament have one thing in common. Both are united by a common theme of still desiring God's presence.

Even when things are good, he wants God's presence and when things are bad, he wants the same thing. In verse 4, the psalmist has one thing, one thing, you know, when it all boils down, one thing that he asks of God in the successes of life, he desperately wants to soak up his presence.

In verses 8 and 9, the one thing that he asks in God's seeming absence, the one thing that he asks when God does not appear to be with him is that he wants God to turn his absence into his presence.

[10 : 12] And so, whether it is praise or whether it is lament, the psalmist is of the same mind. whether he is in the glory of God having fulfilled his promises and being present with him or whether he is in the depths of desolation, he wants the same thing.

He wants God. His intense longing is for God. It is for the fullness of life which he knows is found alone in God.

In God, you see, there is blessedness. In his presence is everything David wants and needs. And in his presence, he can do the things that are outlined in verse 6.

He can have exaltation over his enemies. He can sacrifice with shouts of joy in the presence of God. He can sing and he can make music to him. When these things are the case, he can do it.

Friends, let's spend some time just reflecting on what we've found. You see, first, underneath this psalm, there lies a fundamental premise. And that fundamental premise is the first commandment.

[11 : 23] There is one God and all that is valuable in life is found in him. There is one God and all that is valuable in life is found in him.

David knew this. He believed it. He clung to it. Second, this God is a creator and a redeemer.

This is both implied and it's stated throughout the psalm. In verse 1, David rejoices that God is his light and his salvation. He is the stronghold of his life. In verse 2, God sustains him and redeems him from his enemies.

Third, in this God, there is fullness of life. You see, David is clear at every level. His greatest longing, his greatest desire, the goal of his search is, as we've said, the presence of this God.

For in his presence is the fulfillment of all that he wants for, all that he wishes for. Can you see what's being said? The fundamental longing that David feels is shaped by his creatureliness.

[12 : 32] He and we were made for God. God fashioned us for him and placed within us a deep longing for him.

And the rest of the Bible agrees. You see, the very first three pages of the Bible and the last two pages of the Bible say, you were made for this. You were made to be in a garden with God.

You were made to be in a garden city with God. You were made for this. I started this way, I end this way because that is what you were made for.

These pages make it clear in everything in between that we find ultimate pleasure and joy and happiness when we are in untainted relationship with God.

This is what God made us for. He made us for him and fullness of life is found in him. So there is the theological and the theoretical framework.

[13 : 42] Now I want to tell you about reality. We started with C.S. Lewis didn't we? So it's only appropriate and the beginning of C.S. Lewis's converted life it's only appropriate we turn to him at a different point.

Let me read to you some of the jottings from his notebook after his wife died. Early in his grief he writes this meanwhile where is God?

This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. you see when you're happy so happy that you have no sense of needing him so happy that you attempt to feel his claims upon you as an interruption if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise you will be or so it feels welcomed with open arms the more emphatic the silence will become.

There are no lights in the windows. There might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It did seem so once, and that seeming was as strong as this.

What can this mean? Why is he so present a commander in our times of prosperity and very absent? A help in our trouble.

[15 : 38] This man's in deep grief, isn't he? Can you hear his doubt? Can you hear his yearning after God that he knows and loves? Friends, I wonder if you've ever been there with C.S. Lewis.

I have. And you know what I found myself doing? Asking God why he wasn't there. And there's something really strange about that, isn't there? That in his very absence, I am talking to him.

In his very absence, I'm calling out to him. Acting as though he were present and accessible. You see, friends, this is the world of reality. It is the world of the Bible.

You see, the very first recorded prayer in the Bible is a lament. Did you ever think about that?

It's the lament of Cain in Genesis 4. And that lament saturates the Old Testament. Approximately one-third of the psalms are laments.

[16 : 42] The Lord Jesus himself uses a lament psalm in his dying breath, Psalm 22. The Apostle Paul laments in 2 Corinthians 12.

The Christian martyrs of Revelation 6 lament as their voices come up from the altar like incense to God. Friends, people throughout the Old and the New Testament scriptures often ask the sort of questions that C.S. Lewis asked.

And these questions lurk underneath this psalm. You can see it in the way the psalm begins and the way it ends. Look at him in verse 1. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? Now that's strong, isn't it? That's triumphant. Now listen to verse 14.

Wait for the Lord. Be strong and courageous. Wait for the Lord. The triumph, the exaltation, they've gone. Doubt has entered.

[17 : 47] God is somewhere not where he should be. And so you say, well, I guess I'll just have to wait. The reality of God's presence has been replaced with the wish for God's presence.

The beginning, he was there. Now he is wished for. You can see the very same thing at the end of the book of Lamentations. You can see it in the Lament Psalms time and time again.

Triumph is often replaced by urging patience and strength while God is waited to be he whom the psalmist remembers him to have been in the past.

In the words of Lewis, so often the silence though is emphatic. There are presently no lights in the windows and the house of God seems empty.

And all you can do is doubt that he is there or that he is good or that he was there. All you can do at that point is to do what? Is to wait.

[18 : 46] To wait for what you know him to be and to wait for how you have experienced him in the past and you know that he is. Friends, this psalm records for us what so many of us know in the daily reality of relating to God.

And friends, if you have not known it yet, the day will come. The day will come. You see, we long for God. We long to be in his presence.

We long to gaze upon his beauty. And so often we find ourselves caught between these two states of our existence. On the one hand, we find ourselves declaring, God is my God.

He alone is God. He is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? And on the other side, we find ourselves saying to ourselves, be patient.

Wait for God. He will be what I've known him to be in the past, but I'm not experiencing him to be in the present. And in between those two statements is the reality of life.

[19 : 55] A reality filled with desire. Anticipation of joyous thanks. Anguish. Pleas. Questioning his justice and his judgment.

Fear of his abandonment forever. Protest. Longing to be at home in his presence, but at the same time disputing with him.

So what do we do while we wait? What do we do while we say to God, please be this which I know you to be? What do we do while we wait? I want to suggest three things to you tonight, and we'll wrap up with those three things.

But here are my three things. One. The book of Lamentations, C.S. Lewis and this psalm and all laments of scripture would say, Do not fudge.

Do not fudge. Like C.S. Lewis and like the psalmist, we must talk to God. In his seeming absence, we can approach him with boldness.

[20 : 58] We can plead with him. We can be honest with him. We can express our anguish to him. We can tell him we seek him, and we long to be back in intimacy with him. We can talk to him, and we can say, This is what I am experiencing.

It is not what I expected, and perhaps it's not what I deserve. We can talk to God. You see, friends, do not fudge about this.

It is a terrible thing that we sing only joyous songs all the time because I know that in this congregation there are people not feeling that way. And we sing songs that are just full of boldness, songs that say, God can do absolutely everything, and I'm feeling wonderful about him.

And some of us can't sing that, friends. For some of us, it's a fudge. Do not fudge with God. It is to be worked through. That's what the psalms do.

So, second, we should bring such doubt and angst and anger even out into the open. Friends, we live in a Christian world that has forgotten lament except in the privacy of our own hearts.

[22 : 07] Although, there's one other place that it appears. It appears in Christian albums sung by individuals. Have you noticed that? That is, you'll find occasionally in Christian albums of individual singers that they will sing lament.

They will say, this is how I'm feeling. But we don't do it corporately any longer. And I think the reasons for this are multiple, but they are deplorable. See, I'm with an Old Testament scholar called Krauss-Vesterman, and he argues that he knows of no text in the New Testament which would prevent a Christian from lamenting.

He cannot find any New Testament text which would express the idea that faith in Christ excludes lamentation from a person's relationship with God.

Now, friends, you see, many Christians are rightly, and I'm one of them, lamenting the loss of lament among Christians. By all means, let us sing songs of rejoicing.

Let us rejoice in the Lord always. And again, I say rejoice. Let's urge each other on when we find God is our light and our salvation, and let's say to each other, yes, this is our God.

[23 : 22] But let's weep with those who weep for goodness sake. Let us weep with those who weep, and let us cry out to God alongside and on behalf of those who groan and sigh, because life is not yet what God promised it to be.

Let us allow people to bring before God their grief and their doubt, and let it be come out into the open. And if you've got someone who does it in a Bible study group, don't give them trite answers.

Let them weep. Let them express what they're feeling. Let them say, this is where I am. Let them weep and weep with them. At this point, I wonder if I might just plead to return to the reading of psalms regularly in church.

You see, it used to be if you were Anglican, you read a psalm every week in church. And there was a great thing about that because a third of them will lament. And so they allowed you to lament.

They allowed you to say, that's where I am. I know where he is. I'm there too. But when you drop them, you can't do it. And given all our songs are so triumphalist because we are so triumphalist, we've got no place where we can actually, and then our Bible study groups where we've got to be so theologically correct all the time.

[24 : 44] Well, it's actually correct to be theologically correct to lament when that's where you are. Friends, dropping psalm reading has stripped away from us one of the very few remaining expressions of lament that remain in our overly triumphalist Christianity.

Friends, lament is not blasphemy. It is an appropriate and honest response in a world which is still subject to futility.

And groaning about it is a godly response. Don't believe me? Read Romans 8. Good New Testament psalm. A Good New Testament text which talks about the groaning that we feel.

Groaning is a godly response. Even God's rich gift of the Spirit within us, so God Himself within us, helps us groan as He intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Third thing we should do as Lewis and the psalmist does. We should continue to nurture our desire for God in the midst of our distress. You see, although subjectively we feel God to be distant, we know that fullness of life is found only in Him.

[25 : 58] He alone is God. He alone is worthy of our worship. In His presence alone is fullness of joy. And He loves us. And we can be confident in His love.

We see it. We can see His goodness. And we will see His goodness because His nature is to be good. He's the eternal God. He's not going anywhere. And so He will continue to love and be good for that is His nature.

Fourth and final point. We should acknowledge that we, Christians, have a guarantee that the psalmist did not have. You see, the psalmist knew himself to be formed by God, intimately known by God.

But we know that the Lord Jesus Christ has died for us and formed an unbreakable bond between Himself and us.

He will never let us go. We are His people. We are bought with His blood. We are ransomed to be His children for eternity.

[27 : 05] We are destined to be gathered around His throne in His presence for everlasting. We are members, we are told in the book of Hebrews, of Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem.

We are citizens of the city of the living God. Our names are written in heaven in His book. We are those who belong to His Son, Jesus Christ.

Friends, it is for this reason and this reason alone I think that we can join in with David. Even though we can identify with His anguish, we can also identify with His brimming confidence and we can say the Lord is my light and my salvation.

Whom shall I fear? Or what shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom should I be afraid? Wait for the Lord.

Be strong and courageous. Wait for the Lord. And in Jesus He will respond. Let's pray.

[28 : 17] Father, we thank You that in Jesus You are our light and our salvation. We know there is none that we can fear, that none will snatch us out of Your hand.

Thank You that You are the stronghold of our life, that we have no need to be afraid. Father, we know that for many of us the reality of life is longing for Your presence and not feeling it.

Help us, because of Jesus, Father, to wait for You and to be strong and courageous. Please give us that faithfulness, that ability to wait for You.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Amen.

[29 : 28] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.