

Singing My Pain: Psalms of Lament

Jeff Jones

Hello, and if you are just now tuning into this service, hearing the message, then welcome as today we begin a new series, *Songs of Summer*. When we first planned this series, months ago, the plan was to build it around a party theme, like summer beach parties and pool parties...kind of a “party in the USA” kind of thing. So, we were going to include feature songs that were just fun, like you would hear at a beach party. I was going to start off the series wearing some kind of Hawaiian shirt, maybe flip flops. That was the plan a few months ago, but we are facing a whole different world now. We aren’t in a party mode in culture right now, and I’m not sure when that is coming back. Right now, our culture is feeling like it is ripping apart. The divides and disparities were there, but now they have come to the surface as people’s frustrations have reached a tipping point, and we as a culture are not handling it well. We will talk about what is happening in our culture more specifically, what we need to be hearing from those who are protesting and lamenting, and what to do with it, as this sermon progresses. All this to say, the party theme we had planned is not what fits the moment.

As it turns out though, in God’s timing, this series, *Songs of Summer*, comes at a perfect time to help bring some guidance in these troubling days. The series is on this Old Testament book called Psalms, right in the middle of our Bibles. It is a very authentic record of prayers of various people who come to God in all kinds of circumstances, sometimes joyful, other times in great darkness and confusion. Psalms are prayers put to music, designed to be sung in corporate worship in the temple, like our worship songs we just sang a little earlier. It is a powerful book to have in the Bible because it shows us what is worshipful to God, but also these songs are so helpful to us whenever we are going through what we go through. Because they all come out of different circumstances, when you are troubled or when you are rejoicing or whatever is going on, you can turn to the book of psalms and find one or more than fit. Others at the time really won’t so you just breeze past them. Different songs for different times.

Years ago, I visited a church out of town that was maybe my most memorable church visit ever. I had no idea that this church was in so much turmoil, and it sadly ended up splitting right down the middle. I was just going to church. I had no idea what would happen in that service, but right in the service, the crowd took over the room. The leaders did open the service up for that, but they had no idea what would happen. People were so angry, and they began yelling at each other

and it got way beyond ugly. At one of those ugly moments, a lady in the church trying to pull it out of such a bad place, stood and asked everyone to join her as she led a worship song, a song called, *We Are One in the Spirit*. It used to be a big song way back in the 70's, and people awkwardly tried to sing along (sing a bit), but it was just not the right time. Good song, bad timing. It was so awkward. Every circumstance, especially when we are going through something significant, has its own song.

This summer, there is a certain type of psalm, that feels most appropriate, called lament. Of the 150 psalms, 42 of them, about 1/3, are laments. A lament is an expression of grief, of anger, of frustration, of confusion, borne out of great suffering and pain. In current American worship expression, we don't do laments as worship songs, so to us they don't sound worshipful at all. But God chose these songs to put in the Bible as examples of what is worshipful to him, and about 1/3 of the psalms are these laments. That tells me that there is probably a disconnect between what we think is worshipful and what God thinks is worshipful. He likes the happy ones and hopeful ones we sing too, the 2/3, but he includes in his book of songs laments that we don't sing and probably need to learn how to, because they are not only worshipful to him but also very healing and helpful for us.

Today the song of summer we are picking out from that book of Psalms is Psalm 88, a lament song that is a unique one among the laments. 40 out of the 42 laments in psalms all have a common flow to them. They start dark, get darker, and then at some point toward the end of the prayer, the psalmist is reminded of God's character, or his past faithfulness, and there is a shift toward hope. So, 40 of the 42 start dark, get darker, and then end on a hopeful note. Even if the circumstances are still dark, the psalmist is able to connect to God who is above the circumstances and is good. Two of them, however, Psalm 39 and Psalm 88, never lift out of the darkness.

Our Psalm today, 88, is probably the darkest of all of them, and therefore to our ears, it will feel like the strangest worship song ever. But obviously it is one that honors God and is also one that can really help us in times like we are going through as a culture. Lament is part of the journey with God that is necessary. If you know me very well, you probably know that I don't do things like lament well. I don't do sad well. Years ago, a counselor tried to help me with that, but I don't think we got very far. The guy was kind of a downer, so I didn't stay with him long. Even as I talked about sad times with him, he was like, "Why are you smiling?" It's actually a real problem for me. Some of you do sad well, but I think most us don't. Lament is something more profound though than just being sad, but

even in this cultural moment we are in, if we can't learn to lament well, to sit in the anger and hurt and frustration and identify with our African American brothers and sisters, we will not be able to move toward the changes needed with fire and with depth. Lament is necessary right now, as it is in other times of life when we go through really difficult times. So, I'm going to read the whole psalm, where the psalmist, a guy we will meet named Heman, lays out the darkest worship song in the Bible. As we listen, be open to how it taps into dark times we are going through now or you have gone through in the past.

Psalms 88:1-18

“Lord, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you. Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you? Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion? But I cry to you for help, Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. You have taken from me friend and neighbor-- darkness is my closest friend.”

See what I mean? So dark! Multiple times he uses the word “darkness,” which would have to be theme of this psalm. Notice how it ends, *darkness is my closest friend*. That's dark. Can you relate to that? Maybe now, maybe some other time of life? He is writing this prayer, this song, from the deepest darkness, as he said from *the lowest pit and the darkest depths*.

Psalms 88:6

“...the lowest pit, the darkest depths.”

Some of us have been there and some of us are there. I have certainly been in deep discouragement over these last days and can recall times such as a period of clinical depression years ago, where all I could see was darkness. I felt like I was in a deep, dark, pit, with no way out—that I would be there forever. That’s how he felt, which is why he says, *from my youth* it’s been like this, meaning it has always been like this.

Psalms 88:15

“From my youth…”

We’ll see later that was an exaggeration, not true, but when we are times of such deep darkness, that’s part of the pain. We can’t see light, and we do lose all perspective. It’s like people who are placed in solitary confinement, especially in total darkness, who begin to lose their minds, because they have so sense of anything. That’s where the psalmist is coming from, and in that time, he writes this song that God puts in the Bible.

The psalm is therefore so helpful, because it answers the question, “What does God want me to do when I am in a dark hole? When I lost perspective, when I can’t see my way out of this?” What do you do? You do what he does. You lament. You allow yourself to feel the depth of the discouragement and frustration and confusion, and you come authentically to God. That’s a key word for today, AUTHENTICITY, because it is what God wants from us.

Authenticity

This psalm more than any other shows that’s what God wants. Real worship is not acting like we are okay when we are not okay. God is saying, “It’s okay not to be okay,” and when we are not okay, we don’t have to fake it.

This song as a worship song is uncomfortable to hear, because he is so raw. He is coming at God, as if his problems were God’s fault, that God caused them. He is angry and sarcastic, and the whole tone feels very offensive to God. He is coming right at God, saying things like, “*I have borne your terrors and am in despair.*”¹⁶ *Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.*

Psalm 88:15-16

“I have borne your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.

He also says, *“You have put me in the lowest pit, the darkest depths.”*

SLIDE _____) Psalm 88:6

“You have put me in the lowest pit, the darkest depths.”

In his mind, God has done this to him, and what is worse is that God doesn't seem to care.

He says, *“Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?”*

SLIDE _____) Psalm 88:14

“Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?”

Whatever his troubles are, he is charging God with wrongdoing—that God has done this to him, and since God doesn't seem to be responding, then he obviously doesn't care. Now, neither of those things are actually true. They feel true to him, but they aren't true. In a fallen world, we will go through times of deep trouble and pain. That always throws us for a loop because the Bible lets us know that we weren't made for that. You and I were created to live in the Garden of Eden, like Adam and Eve enjoyed before the fall—a perfect world, with no need, no darkness, no tears, no injustice, no racism, no frustration, no pain. One day Jesus will return and restore things, actually make a new world that is perfect again. But we don't live in perfect. When mankind chose sin, sin entered in and made this world the often dark and difficult place it is. God didn't want that for us, and he isn't the one who causes our pain. And he does care, so much so that he came here and took on humanity in part to know what it is like to struggle like we do so he can help us in our time of need when we come to him. All that to say, he doesn't deserve the treatment that he is getting from this psalmist that is coming at him with these unfair charges against him—that he, God, caused all this, and that he doesn't care.

So, why does God not take offense? If I was God, I would. I might just use a lightning bolt to end this guy's little tirade. But God not only doesn't do that, he puts this song in the Bible as an example of worship songs that are worshipful to him. Why? Because God doesn't expect us to always maintain good perspective. He knows we will lose perspective in a broken world, and he is okay with that. As another psalm says,

SLIDE _____) Psalm 103:13-14 (NLT)

“The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unending love...The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he knows how weak we are; he remembers we are only dust.”

He knows our weakness. He knows that we don't know the big picture like he does. He knows that there will be times we will just lose it. And he is okay with that, so much so that he invites us to come to him and just lay it all out there, even if it is unfair to him and not true.

He wants our authenticity. He is not honored by fake. Real worship is not denying the reality of what we go through, acting like everything is okay, and singing, “I'm happy, happy, happy all the time,” when we are in fact not happy at all. God knows what we are going through, and the fake thing just doesn't work for him. He loves us, and he knows there will be times where we totally lose perspective and he can handle that.

So, the psalmist comes to him in prayer, in worship, authentically, but that's not all that honors God. Authenticity honors God, but even bigger than that, it is the fact that psalmist is coming to him is what honors him. The psalmist honors God, because even though this may be a prayer that off when it comes to perspective, it is a prayer. What honors God is that this guy is totally disillusioned and frustrated, but what does he do with all that? He prays. He comes to God with it. That's what God wants for us, to come to him authentically in prayer even when we have lost all perspective, all hope, all ability to pray in a nice, clean way. The very act of coming to God even when God isn't making sense honors him.

In fact, this guy, prays a lot in his darkness. As he says, “day and night” and “in the morning.” Beginning at the start of the day, and all throughout the day and into the sleepless nights, he is praying. He is persevering. He stays with God, even when

staying with God isn't make sense to him as he has lost perspective. Doing so is a sign of great faith. Acting like things are okay when they are not is not great faith. But coming to God authentically when we are not okay, even not okay with God at the moment, is an act of great faith.

God puts so many of these examples in the Bible, where people doubt God and are struggling and they are falling, but what do they do? They fall forward. They bring their pain and frustration authentically before God, and he is not offended by that. He is honored by that.

And eventually, you know what happens? Eventually, we actually do get perspective, eventually we do move from a place of lament to a place of hope, whether our circumstances change or not. That may not happen for some people until they die or until Jesus returns, but almost always it happens before that.

We know that it did for Heman, because we know a good bit about how Heman was. As we read in 1 Chronicles 6 and other passages, Heman was actually an important person in the time of King David and King Solomon. He was the most prominent worship leader of his day, in both the tabernacle days of David and the opening of the temple with Solomon. He had 14 sons and 3 daughters, who all were musicians and worship leaders together, so they had something like Hillsong Worship going right in their own family, leading God's people in the same way our worship leaders here at Chase Oaks do. If he was live today, he would be the most well-known and well-loved worship leader of his day, probably wearing really fancy sneakers and skinny jeans, and we'd all have him on Spotify and Pandora.

I'm saying all that because he didn't stay in the pit. He led and wrote lots of worship songs that were full of joy and hope, songs for a different time in life than what he was going through when he wrote Psalm 88. He would in the end know God as his closest friend, not darkness. He would move to a place of greater hope and joy. But please understand this, and please lean and hear me. Lament for him was just as important in his life of faith as songs of joy and hope. The lament songs were not oops songs. God puts forty-two of these laments among the 150 psalms for a reason. Lament has a very important purpose in the life of a believer.

And we need to understand that, that lament is part of the journey of faith. It's not where we want to get stuck, and that can happen. We can get stuck in despair and frustration. But biblical lament actually helps us get unstuck. It allows us to feel honestly what we are feeling, which is important. But it doesn't stop there, because in lament we bring all that to God, just like Heman did. He receives our authentic

frustration and hurt and anger and pain. In doing so, we will eventually find his strength and hope, authentically so, in a deep way. But God is telling us it is okay to feel what we are feeling and to be honest with God about it. He can take it. In fact, he wants to take it. He knows we don't have the big picture, and that he does.

What does that mean now in our culture that is at such a troubled place?

Understand, what is most troubling to God in our culture is not violence. That's troubling. But the trouble right now in our culture is racism, the racism that is baked into our culture in subtle ways and not so subtle ways, and that does lead to injustices that people of color have to deal with all the time. That statement has facts to back it up, and you can't deny them. Here are just a few:

- Black Americans and white Americans use drugs at similar rates, but Black Americans are 6 times more likely to be arrested for it.
- Black students make up only 15% of enrollment, but they make up 30-40% of students that get suspended or expelled. An independent study found that this was not because of worse behavior issues.
- Black Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested. Once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted, and once convicted, they are more likely to experience lengthy prison sentences.
- On average, Black men in the US receive sentences that are 19.1% longer than those of white men convicted for the same crimes.
- With routine traffic stops, black and Hispanic drivers are 3 times more likely to be searched than white people and twice as likely to be arrested when something is found.
- One US study found that job resumes with traditionally white-sounding names received 50% more callbacks than those with traditionally Black names.
- From 2013 to 2017, white patients in the US received better quality health care than about 34% of Hispanic patients, 40% of Black patients, and 40% of Native American patients.

I have plenty more statistics, but I hope that is enough to help all of us get what is lamentable and what drives a just God to righteous anger. Over these last weeks, between Ahmaud Aubrey to George Floyd, you who are people of color are likely lamenting now and have been for some time. Psalm 88 shows us that God is more than okay with how you are feeling when you are feeling angry and frustrated and exhausted. He is even okay when you lose perspective. What honors him is authenticity and continuing to come to him prayerfully for strength and hope.

Others of us listening may not be lamenting in the same way, and here I am really talking to white people like me. If you are not lamenting right now, I think that is a real problem. And I'm not talking about lamenting how people are handling their hurt and frustration, many of them in ways that are inappropriate. I realize that can cloud things right now. But let's not let that happen. If we are not lamenting, it's because we are not listening. If you and I listen to what it is like to be a person of color right here in our own community, we will join the lament if we have a heart at all—and I believe everyone who is listening has a heart. So, let's listen. As we heard from Ryan earlier, and as I've had the opportunity to listen to many people of color over these last days, share how exhausting it is to live in a world that is tilted against them in lots of ways. When friends of mine, neighbors of mine, have to be careful about what they wear when they go for a jog and make sure they smile really big at their white neighbors so they don't scare anybody, when friends of mine have to sit down with their 12 year old son, as a rite of passage, letting them know how they have to navigate a white world as a black man, to make sure people perceive them a positive way, including how to interact with law enforcement in a way that I have never had to tell my kids to do; and in a world where people of color are way more likely to get mistreated by police, to get harsher sentences for the same crime, and can't just count on justice the way you and I as white people do, we need to listen so that we can join in the lament. This has been going on for 400 years in our country. Are we surprised that many people of color are just tired and feeling desperate to be heard?

As a church, we are a multi-ethnic one on purpose, but we are still a majority white church. Recently I read Martin Luther King's Letter's from a Birmingham Jail, where he said 50 years ago:

SLIDE _____)

“I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

-Dr. Martin Luther King

That's convicting to me as a white Christian, because the real concern isn't the all-out racists, but the white moderates like me, who by being silent find myself complicit in ongoing racism in our culture, both the overt kind of racism, and subtle racism that people face every day. People like me have to not only lament other people's pain but come to a place of lament for my own soul. The Bible says that sorrow comes before repentance, so before we can really move forward individually, before we can move forward as a church, before we can move forward as a culture, we have to come to place of personal sorrow, personal lament, and then we can repent with depth. We can allow God root out any racism in us. We can allow God to move us from being complacent and therefore complicit, to being a person God can use to change our society as we use whatever influence we have wherever we have it to bring about justice for those whose voices have not been heard. That's what righteous people do. We don't just go to church and sing songs. As the Bible says, we are people who "do justice."

Part of the process though is lament, is allowing us to feel the hurt and frustration we are feeling, both with our culture and with ourselves, and maybe even with God. So, we are going to do that right now. The sermon is not actually over, but I want to stop so that we can come to God and lament.

Pray.

At some point, authentically coming to God in lament, takes us somewhere, to a place of hope and a place of action. I do have hope, because God is at work in our world and the power of the gospel to bring reconciliation has proven itself over and over again. Love is more powerful than hate. The hope of our culture is Jesus, who changes us from the inside out and who forms a new kind of community that we call church.

That said, let's end this talk asking, "Where do we go from here?" Lament is important not to skip, because without it we will just be shallow in our response. But what does a meaningful response look like? I talked about that with Ryan this week, and what he had to say was so helpful that I want to share it with us as a guide for all of us.

Interview.

I'm so thankful for Ryan, and I'm thankful for you too. For people of color in our church, I know it would be easier to just go to a church full of people just like you, who would get you right away. I don't know how to adequately express how much I admire you and appreciate you being part of a church like Chase Oaks that has a

Songs of Summer Week 1
June 5/7, 2020

multi-cultural vision. I do believe it is a higher calling, but I know it is harder. And for people in the majority culture at Chase Oaks, let's realize how much responsibility we have. Racism is not unique to white people, but since white people are the majority culture, we have way more power than we think to shape American life. Whenever God gives power and influence, it isn't for us, but for others—those that don't have it. So, let's be open to God and responsible with that, and let's not lose this cultural moment. I believe for all of us God wants to do something very profound in this particular moment, in our own hearts, in our church, and in our community. Let's not miss it. If we just go back a few months later to life as it was before, that would so disappoint the heart of God. These things that we just talked about, let's do them. This won't be the last time we talk about this moment, but let's make sure we are open to what God is wanting to do. With that in mind, let's pray again and commit ourselves to what he wants to do.

FEMVA