



# What Are We Doing Here?

## Week 2: Psalms of Lament

Brian Mattson - 03/01/2026

I have lived a sheltered and privileged life these last 41 years. I'm made abundantly aware of that fact as the days pass me by, and I'm involved with more and more people, representing greater and greater diversity of thought, opinion, situation, and circumstance. That's not to say I haven't had my fair share of frustrations and fears, doubt, anger, sadness, or despair. But I must admit, and humbly declare, that I have lived a lucky and blessed life.

So it was to my astonishment when I watched someone weep and wail in prayers of pleading. I wasn't surprised because of her prayers, but because she was a staff member at the church where I was working when I was 25. Church people don't get mad or angry with God, I thought, naively. But there she was, at the prayer time in the lobby of the church, a time of prayer for staff, members, volunteers, or anyone else who wanted to join. This wasn't a private moment of unashamed tears and sadness in front of God alone in her bedroom. There were about a dozen people in a circle witnessing this moment of distress. And it was an ugly-cry, full of tears, a runny nose, and shaky speech. I stood there, unsure of what to do or how to react, while simultaneously wondering if this was appropriate.

Her prayers were dripping with raw emotion, hoping and praying for a beloved family member who was riddled with sickness and diminishing, despite the best efforts of doctors. This wasn't the first week we'd heard this

request, but the dam holding back her emotions finally burst that day, spilling tears onto the carpet and cries echoing into the air. We all exchanged hugs and held hands and continued our prayers for this family member, for what appeared to be a journey to the end of life. And I was reminded that what we want and yearn for doesn't always materialize, no matter how hard we pray or how many people we get to pray for us and with us.

There are times when I, too, prayed through tears. I've prayed through anger, real, visceral, red-hot anger. At God. How could God let something happen or cause something to happen? Are you there God, it's me, Brian? Is this thing on? Can you hear me? Are you powerless? Have you forgotten me?

These sentiments have been shared by Christians around the world for generations. Even before Christianity. It seems humans have always had those unanswerable questions about life. The Jewish people captured so many of these same feelings and emotions in the Church's ancient prayer and songbook, the Psalter. We know it as the Book of Psalms, a collection of humanity's pleas and plights. They are unique in scripture, in that they represent our collective cries to God rather than God's words to us. As Walter Brueggemann says:

**The Psalms, with a few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity—gathered over a long period of time, but a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity.**

**- Walter Brueggemann**

These are the refrains of people in the midst of real life. They don't have their church clothes on. They are simply wearing their hearts on their sleeves. Some of it is pure joy. Some of it is deep dejection. In other instances, we see well-adjusted words of stability and harmony. Brueggemann offers a helpful way of reading the Psalms in three categories. He notes "that our life of faith consists in moving with God in terms of:

- 1. Being securely oriented**
- 2. Being painfully disoriented**
- 3. Being surprisingly reoriented**

And as such, we can read the words of many Psalms in one of these three buckets. While there are fewer Psalms and thus a lesser theme in the first bucket, it's important to note that our prayers and songs can rise to God from a place of balance and equilibrium. There are times in life when things just seem to click and we remember to thank God for each holy breath. I have prayed those prayers. Those are the days when my prayers usually just sound like this: *God, can time stop in this moment, right here, forever.*

The people around us, our situations in professional environments, our personal lives, are all just going well and we say thanks. Life is good. The prayers are honest and even-keeled. Stable and grounded. But our measured words of moderation can also be masks. We say these nice prayers because, perhaps, we think that's what we're supposed to do. We've been trained in our Western Ways to talk about God, faith, church, and Jesus with nice words.

But so many of the Psalms are just the opposite. They are prayers of people having it out with God, and prayers of people in awe of God. Sometimes in the same Psalm! These are the Psalms that stick with us and we tend to connect with. Prayers from the edges of our humanity. Brueggemann says:

**“The Psalms propose to speak about human experience in an honest, freeing way. This is in contrast to much human speech and conduct which is in fact a cover-up... For the normal, conventional functioning of public life, the raw edges of disorientation and reorientation must be denied or suppressed for purposes of public equilibrium. As a result, our speech is dulled and mundane... Against that, the speech of the Psalms is abrasive, revolutionary, and dangerous. It announces that life is not like that, that our common experience is not one of well-being and**

**equilibrium, but a churning, disruptive experience of dislocation and relocation.”**

**- Walter Brueggemann**

Do you agree with that? We tend to hide our true feelings and emotions, *especially* in regards to our faith, with mundane words? *It's fine. I'm doing good, thanks for asking.* But on the inside we are wondering how a good God, the cosmic creator, could allow such mistreatment of Creation? We are secretly pleading for God to be our vengeance when we see good people suffer and bad people succeed. We want our unanswerable questions answered. We want the God of Israel's past, the God of miracles, to show up again. Or maybe we are just downright mad and frustrated with God, or so mad at the world that we blame God. You can find much of that in these songs and prayers. That's one of the main purposes of the Book of Psalms.

This is a collection of ancient Israel's expressions of lament, hope, faith, and despair. An anthology of the people's ongoing conversations with God. Walter Brueggemann calls the Psalms Israel's "normative script for dialogical covenantalism." That's a complicated seminary sentence to basically say these words capture a back-and-forth conversation between God and people inside of the established covenant relationship. And nearly half of the Psalms are ones of lament. These are conversations that show real grief and sadness. Raw emotions. People in distress and despair. And oftentimes, those prayers are paired with moments of hope and praise.

One of my favorite Biblical Scholars, Pete Enns, says, "The Psalms famously let people yell at God about suffering and also sing God's praises often in the same Psalm. And that makes the Psalter something of an emotional rollercoaster of trust at times." Here's how that sounds in Psalm 42 from The Message translation, which helps give new life to old words.

**A white-tailed deer drinks from the creek;  
I want to drink God, deep drafts of God.**

**I'm thirsty for God-alive. I wonder, "Will I ever make it—  
arrive and drink in God's presence?"  
I'm on a diet of tears—tears for breakfast, tears for supper.  
All day long people knock at my door, Pestering,  
"Where is this God of yours?"  
These are the things I go over and over,  
emptying out the pockets of my life.  
I was always at the head of the worshiping crowd, right out in  
front,  
Leading them all, eager to arrive and worship,  
Shouting praises, singing thanksgiving—  
celebrating, all of us, God's feast!**

**- Psalm 42:1-4 MSG**

The rest of the verses in Psalm 42 follow a similar pattern. The journey from despair to praise is recounted in the plight of the psalmist's current situation, yet he remains hopeful, even expectant, that the LORD will remain faithful, just as God was faithful in the past. It's important to remember that the psalmist is not requesting a specific answer or deliverance. Rather it's a cry to God, a cry that things aren't good. But hope remains because of God's faithfulness in the past, and it is in God's character, God's covenant obligation, to be faithful in the future. We talk to God to keep the conversation open and to keep the relationship honest. So often in life, we hear that relationships die when people quit communicating. That's part of the purpose of these psalms and the purpose of our prayers—to keep communication open. That our partner—whoever is on the other end—still hears our thoughts and our hearts in honest and unabridged dialog.

Perhaps the most famous example of this in the Bible is Psalm 22. This is the Psalm that Jesus references from the cross—*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* This Psalm follows a similar back-and-forth pattern, but the

words paint such a vivid picture, especially when we remember these are the words Jesus pulls from the memory bank to utter in his suffering.

**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night but find no rest.**

Jesus only spoke the first line, but here are some more of the sentiments in this heart-rending psalm. *But I am a worm and not human, scorned by others and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they sneer at me; they shake their heads; For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they bound my hands and feet. I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.*

And through this back and forth dialog between the psalmist and God, between Jesus and God—maybe even between us and God—are words of remembrance. Words of hope and deliverance.

**From the four corners of the earth people are coming to their senses, are running back to God. Long-lost families are falling on their faces before him. God has taken charge; from now on he has the last word. All the power-mongers are before him—worshiping! All the poor and powerless, too—worshiping! Along with those who never got it together—worshiping!**

**Our children and their children will get in on this as the word is passed along from parent to child. Babies not yet conceived will hear the good news—that God does what he says.**

God does what God says. Therein lies our ultimate hope. Throughout all of life's joys and goodness mixed with unbelievable pain and sadness, we remain people of hope in God's faithfulness. It is a core part of our identity. And the Psalms are a core part of our tradition— songs, prayers, and poems of people wrestling with the life of faith.

This book was so instrumental to the Israelites and it is to us today. This anthology has been edited and shaped into a five-part collection, almost certainly intentionally, to give it the same five-part structure as the Torah—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They aren't just a bunch of words to sing and pray. They are more significant than that. They are integral to the life and faith of the people of God. Just like Torah.

And a reason they are so accessible and impactful to us today is because of their generality. There are no allusions to Passover, Jewish feast celebrations, or even the sabbath. Old Testament scholar, Michael Coogan, says the enduring power of the Psalms is their universality to the fundamental aspects of the human condition. They represent individuals and communities who feel threatened, sick, persecuted, happy, grateful, and trusting. All of the emotions in life are captured in these ancient words.

Our prayers are safe places to express our doubt and anger, frustration or fear. In fact, I believe God encourages us to bare our hearts. It might be a little irreverent, but the saying I've seen on shirts, stickers, and coffee mugs—I love Jesus, but I cuss sometimes—rings true. I don't believe God is fearful of our anger and frustration. Our doubts and despair. Our manic *joie de vivre*. These things represent what it means to be human. They are part of our conversations with each other and should be part of our dialog with God. We get angry or sad or frustrated and so we vent to God. Then in the same breath, we are thankful and effusive in our praise.

That was the case with the woman in tears I mentioned at the beginning. Her heart was bare, out in the open with no protection, pleading with God for good news or a change in outcomes or a relief to her sadness. I thought at the time that maybe she was being inappropriate. I recognize now that she was being bold, courageous, and faithful. She was honest and open with God in her time of distress, just like the examples we read in the Psalms. Just like God invites *you* to be. Our relationship with God is strengthened, not diminished, when we are open and free before God in every high, low, or in

between of life. God isn't concerned with being offended. He's more concerned with you shielding your true feelings, emotions, and prayers.

Just this week, our community lost two law enforcement officers in a terrible crime. Our hearts hurt and we mourn with those families. We wonder where is God in times like this? How could God let this happen? Those are questions we may never answer in this life. Yes, that's frustrating. God doesn't want us to pretend our hearts are just fine. But we continue to pray because life—prayer—is an ongoing conversation with God. We pray from moments of being painfully disoriented in hopes that through our talks with God, we will eventually become thoroughly re-oriented in God's steadfast loving kindness.

Today we celebrate Holy Communion. If you've become painfully disoriented with life and need an anchor, I hope this meal offers you a chance to commune with God. Talk with God. This is a time to find your footing again and open your heart up to a fresh conversation. A place to bare your heart, release your anger, and thank the Creator.