

A BIBLICAL GUIDE

Lament

A lament is very common form of prayer in the Bible. Laments are a cry for help born out of pain. When we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when we hurt religiously, we cry out in lament. A lament is a biblical way to complain, make a passionate request, and still express trust to and in God.

When we need to grieve or want to complain and protest; when we feel like screaming in pain & anger... the Bible says to us, *"That's okay, you can! Go right ahead... here are some words that you may want to use when you feel that way."*

The substance of laments include concern with the psalmist's own thoughts and actions or current attitudes concerning the actions of an enemy or concerns with God's action or inaction. Laments are cries of despair, anger, protest, and doubt. They are the largest class of psalms and were a normal part of Israel's praise and worship.

While King David wrote a majority of laments in the Psalms, there are other authors in the Bible who also wrote these *mourning* type poems. Jeremiah was nicknamed "the weeping prophet" for good reason; much of his writing is in a lament format. His second book, LAMENTations, was written to remember and commemorate the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and its Temple.

The entire book of Habakkuk is a prophet's personal struggle and journey of trying to believe that God is good when there is so much evil and tragedy in his world. These three chapters are a series of poems of lament, and they're SUPER similar to what's in the book of Psalms.

After the prophet Habakkuk lodges his complaint, he then draws God's attention to the suffering and injustice in the world, demanding that God do something. He doesn't accuse Israel, he doesn't speak on God's behalf to the people, rather all his words are addressed personally to God.

While most poetry flows freely, often it will take on a certain form. Sometimes poems rhyme... sometimes they don't. Just as Haiku or Sonnets have general formats, the anatomy of a scriptural lament follows a very basic structure as well.

Not every scriptural lament contains each of the elements that follow, but they all contain **most** of them.

The Anatomy of a Scriptural Lament:

1. INTRODUCTION

Identify the Lord as the person being addressed, with a basic direction.

- LORD, I SEEK... peace, comfort, and sleep. I am afraid and worried every day
 - *(what is your cry for help?)*
- RESCUE & DELIVER ME, FOR YOU ARE... my rock and my fortress; my safe place
 - *(what do you know about the character of God?)*
- FOR YOU... give hope to the hopeless, and You are a rock of refuge
 - *(what goodness has God done in the past?)*

2. COMPLAINT / LAMENT

Articulate your problem and ask the Lord for help.

- DELIVER ME FROM... my expectation of how my life should have turned out
 - *(what is the external problem?)*
- FORGIVE ME FOR... depending on my own strength
 - *(confess your sin; explain the internal problem)*

3. CONFESSION OF TRUST

Verbalize your trust in the Lord.

- NEVERTHELESS... You are my strength
 - *(how can you trust in God?)*
- YOU ARE MY... strong tower of refuge
 - *(what has God promised to be?)*

4. **PRAYER FOR DELIVERANCE**

Request deliverance, or God's intervention in your problem.

- SAVE ME FROM... fear and lack of trust
 - *(from what?)*
- DELIVER ME FROM... my own pride and selfishness
 - *(what else?)*
- FOR YOU... delight in saving Your people
 - *(how have you seen God intervene in scripture?)*

5. **STATEMENT OF CONFIDENCE**

In spite of all that is being felt or said, THIS is Truth.

- BUT I WILL... hope continually with the expectation of rescue
 - *(how can you hope, knowing that God will hear you?)*

6. **VOW OF PRAISE**

Offer praise and thanksgiving to God for God's many blessings.

- I WILL PROCLAIM... how You give me freedom and safety from my fears
 - *(what will you proclaim about God?)*
 - I WILL SING PRAISE... because You have not abandoned me, and You have promised to comfort me
 - *(why will you praise God?)*
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Example of a Scriptural Lament:

The Psalm on the following page is merely one example of a lament found in Scripture that follows this design using all of these elements. It was written by King David. In this Psalm, he poured out his complaint against his enemies and found peace and refuge in God.

Psalm 4

Address and introductory cry

¹ Answer me when I call to you, O God who declares me innocent. Free me from my troubles. Have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

Complaint or Lament

² How long will you people ruin my reputation? How long will you make groundless accusations? How long will you continue your lies? *Interlude*

Confession of Trust

³ You can be sure of this: The LORD set apart the godly for himself. The LORD will answer when I call to him.

Prayer for Deliverance

⁴ Don't sin by letting anger control you. Think about it overnight and remain silent. *Interlude*

⁵ Offer sacrifices in the right spirit, and trust the LORD.

⁶ Many people say, "Who will show us better times?" Let your face smile on us, LORD.

Proclamation of Confidence

⁷ You have given me greater joy than those who have abundant harvests of grain and new wine.

Praise

⁸ In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, O LORD, will keep me safe.

In nearly 50 of the lament psalms we find in Scripture, most can serve as a *template* to help us write our own prayers of lament. My hope is these pages will guide you through the writing process.

Consider taking time to read one or more lament psalms. This can help familiarize you with the format of a biblical lament and can provide language to help inform your own writing. On the following page, you'll find some examples in the Psalms of the different types of laments.

PERSONAL LAMENT –

an individual expressing pain, grief, fear, or other strong negative emotion:

- 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 36, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142.

CORPORATE LAMENT –

a group or nation expressing pain, grief, fear, or other strong negative emotion:

- 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129.

REPENTANT LAMENT –

an individual or group expressing sorrow for sin:

- 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 230, 143

Choose a psalm (or two) from the above listing and read it out loud, slowly, and repeatedly. Pay attention to what parts the Lord seems to be highlighting for you. Ask God to help you discern why those parts stand out to you. Then consider processing that lament by doing one of the following exercises.

1) Rewrite a lament psalm

Select one of the psalms listed above and replace the original words with words that suit your situation. If it feels weird to be changing the words of Scripture, remember that you aren't writing Scripture; you are simply using the prayer outline found in Scripture as a **model** for your own prayer. Each of the lament psalms was written in a unique context, and in the same manner you are writing your own prayer that fits your context.

2) Write using The Anatomy of a Lament (p. 2-3)

Without using a specific psalm as your guide, write your own words that contain the different elements of a lament. (Use pages 7 & 8 in this reader.)

Other Helpful Tips:

- Choose whether you want to write an *individual* lament or a *communal* lament. Is your concern a personal problem, or are you lamenting a societal issue?
 - Keep your phrases/lines short. Avoid long sentences and overly flowery wording. Do your best not to edit the words you use. Part of the point of a lament is to be honest and raw.
 - Be specific and concrete in your statements. Laments are not places for vague generalities. Feel the freedom to share your complaints boldly and specifically with God. Let this be a written stream of consciousness from your heart and mind without hindrance or the need to censor yourself.
 - Feel free to use metaphors or imagery. This will come more easily to some than others, but if you can, try to include this sort of figurative language in your lament.
 - Give your lament a title.
 - If you feel comfortable doing so, share your lament with a trusted friend or family member. If you are part of a Growth Group or Community Group, consider sharing it there.
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Take some time and reflect on how the last week (or a time frame of your choice) has been for you. Make note of the emotions/feelings leading you during this time, pay particular attention to the more negative ones.

Reflect on a specific situation or recurring theme that you know has been causing you distress, pain, or anxiety and that you feel is beyond your control. Imagine that God is with you and that He has given you complete freedom to lay it all out, to complain fearlessly without judgment, in order to get it all off your chest. With some practice you can write your own laments using the structure of a biblical lament. Apply these principles when your heart is heavy and grieved.

A lament is not a quick fix, but God is faithful, and the biblical lament gently but persistently reminds us to trust Him.

Use the lines provided to write your own lament.

1. INTRODUCTION

2. COMPLAINT / LAMENT

3. CONFESSION OF TRUST

4. PRAYER FOR DELIVERANCE

5. STATEMENT OF CONFIDENCE

6. VOW OF PRAISE
