

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Psalm 77**

We began our autumn together talking about the idea of prayer. The very first week I said that prayer is hard to wrap our minds around so we domesticate it. The idea that you and I can communicate with the invisible, all-present creator of the universe, and somehow sense that God speaks back is almost so preposterous that we turn it into *Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep*. We don't take time to step back and say, "What would that really be like?" We suggested that the Psalms in the Bible, they're right about in the middle of the Bible, are prayers that have been written down for people just like us. There are prayers for all moods, but one of the reasons we don't look at them often is because some of them can be so disturbing. We want to look at one of those disturbing prayers today, but I had said that when we got to it, I would spend a couple of minutes talking about why these prayers sometimes offend us. Because prayer is supposed to be about all of our lives, the Psalms reflect those prayers.

There are different kinds. There are times when we praise God. There are times we ask God for help or for guidance. There are Psalms for those times. There are times when we thank God for the blessings we've had or for what seems like answers to prayer. Then there are other times when we complain or we lament about our lives, but sometimes we don't pray about that. Those are the prayers that are called the Lament Psalms. They are different, too. Sometimes they are lamenting because we have messed up. We have sinned and we ask forgiveness. Some laments are about envy. Sometimes they are complaints. "God, why have You blessed her, she's wicked, and not me?" Sometimes the Psalmists praise or they are depressed or they feel abandoned by God. Other Psalms are about the honesty that comes when we feel like we were betrayed by our friends, by people we thought we could trust.

In all those places, the Psalmist remembers that he or she is not living life alone but somehow God is around. That's fine. The disturbing part comes when that complaint turns to anger. These are called the curse Psalms of Lament, like Psalm 79.

⁶ Pour out your wrath on the nations
that refuse to acknowledge you—
on kingdoms that do not call upon your name.

¹⁰ Why should pagan nations be allowed to scoff, asking,
"Where is their God?" [Psalm 79:6, 10]

"Pour out Your wrath on the nations that don't acknowledge You, the nations who look at Your Name and say, 'Where's *your* God?'"

⁹ Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock! [Psalm 137:9]

“God, dash their children’s heads against the rocks.” Whoa! Can we just close our sermon now? We have stepped out of the *Now I lay me down to sleep* part of the Bible. It’s a stumbling block that somebody in the Bible would be asking God to smash the heads of the kids of his opponents against the rocks. I wanted to talk about that for just a minute before we get to the laments. I think in some ways, it should give you confidence that the Bible includes it, that the Bible doesn’t try to smooth it out and that some copyist in the Middle Ages didn’t say, “Oh, God would never say that.” They kept it in because they felt like even the disturbing parts are what we ought to struggle with and ask, what are we trying to say there? The curse Psalms cause us to recognize that they are spoken out of great pain and distress. Even in the worst times of life, people cry out to God and when they cry out to God, it’s about their feelings and not their theology. It’s about how they really feel, the anger they have. They are cursing other people. Sometimes they are even cursing God.

The second thing in the curse Psalms is that you see, after a while, that the Psalmist is not saying, “God, *I’m* going to go out and smash their kids’ heads against the rock.” The Psalmist is trying not to take things into his own hands, but to turn to God and say, “God, You say You love me. You love justice. This is the way that I feel. I leave it to You. Do something.”

The third thing that strikes me is that this is a protection for me. Sometimes my prayers just stink. God has never been known to run out and do everything that we ask when we’re angry, but sometimes we are not ready to hear what God wants to say to us. Jesus is going to teach slowly and painfully that His followers should love their enemies and do good to the people who curse them. But maybe for the days when we’re really angry, really hurting, just saying, “God, deal with it” starts the process and gets those feelings out and allows us to be honest when we’re angry, when we weep, when we want to believe but can’t pray those *Our Father who art in heaven* prayers that day. This is a way that even the Bible can teach us that we’re all growing. We’re all learning. The idea is to bring God into all of our life and not just have our God-part and our real part.

How many of you had a chance to hear Dee McIntosh last week? She was phenomenal. She was just great. I learned about prayer from her. You can see the previous week’s sermon or any of the sermons that go on, even if you’re someplace else, on our web site. At the front page of our web site up at the top right, there is a little camera. I’d encourage you to click on the camera and live stream her sermon.

This last week I learned from another sharp young woman, Amy Carlan. I had the sermon basically done and then I started to look at what my friends around the country did. Amy is an associate pastor at First Presbyterian in Winston-Salem. She preached on this passage and it was great. It was so good, I called her Tuesday when I read it and said, “This was used by God in my life. I’m going to steal it, but if I tell people it’s your stuff, it’s research and not plagiarism.”

God uses all of us to learn how to pray. Prayer or conversation starts where all good stories start. Frederick Buechner, the novelist, says that all good stories begin with a lump in the throat. Something has happened. Or they begin with a tear in the eye or a squeal of joy. That’s when the story starts. Look at this picture for just a second. [Slide shown.] Exactly! Most of you went “Ohhhhhhhh.” Some of you went, “Oh, I hope she catches him.” What do you do when a face like this doesn’t stir joy in your heart? What do you do when a face like this doesn’t brighten your

face because of where you are? If that's the case, I'd say you're ready to learn how to pray a lament. It might start like this.

- ¹ I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
- ² When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands,
and I would not be comforted.
- ³ I remembered you, God, and I groaned;
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.
- ⁴ You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak.
- ⁵ I thought about the former days,
the years of long ago;
- ⁶ I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart meditated and my spirit asked:
- ⁷ "Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?"
- ⁸ Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
- ⁹ Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" [Psalm 77:1-9]

As I brooded over this text for the last couple of weeks, I was struck by what this young Amy in Winston-Salem said. She said she preached about it because this was her favorite Psalm. My first reaction was, "Sister, you need to get out more." But then I realized that there comes a time in everybody's life, maybe even many times, when this Psalm or other Psalms of Lament will become your favorite because it's the only one you have left. You don't know what else to say. We've all experienced the darkness. It's just part of being human.

Today is World Communion Sunday. We have kept our He Knows Your Name letters in front of you to remind you that God does know, but we've wrapped them with barbed wire. Inside we've put pictures from 25 countries around the world where World Communion Sunday feels very different, whether it's Pakistan, Uzbekistan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These are places around the world where it is not only dangerous to be a Christian, but where people run away and if they run, they cry out. That's what a prayer of lament is. You're crying out. The person who prayed Psalm 77 is crying out because he didn't know what else to do. He's groaning. He refuses to be comforted. He can't sleep because he's too disturbed. He can't even talk rationally. I don't know if you've ever been in that place where you don't know how to speak about it. You find yourself obsessing about the good old days and the contrast with the pain leads you to question who God really is at all. Was I wrong all along? This is Psalm 77.

I read tons of scholarly works, commentaries, about this Psalm and did a lot of historical digging, trying to figure out why the Psalmist was in such pain, but nobody knows. We don't know what's gone wrong. I think after a while that's a gift because if, for instance, we discover that the Psalmist was like that because somebody close to him had died, we'd be tempted to think that lament is for those who grieve death. Now, I think pain and darkness come when you experience death, but there are other times that lead us into the darkness. It's the anguish that

comes from a broken marriage. It's the silent grief when you or someone you love has had a miscarriage. It's the anger of having injustice come home.

One of my friends, a bright young kid, a sophomore in college, was returning home in the middle of the evening through the suburbs when he was stopped. The policeman said, "Keep your hands on the wheel." The kid says to his dad, "Dad, I'm an honor student. I'm 19 years old. I'm driving home and I'm supposed to keep my hands on the wheel. What's going on?" It's a lament about injustice. Sometimes the lament is the hurt that comes when a friend tells you they don't want to be your friend anymore. It's the pain of feeling on the outside when everyone else is on the inside. For some of you, the lament is the groaning that comes from being trapped in an unfulfilling job or the distress that comes from watching a loved one hurt themselves and you can't fix it. Lament is the black dog of depression, the depression that takes the edge off of life and engulfs us. You can't even put a finger on it, but it used to be so good and it's not anymore. We could go on and on. This is not my temporary mad on the highway when somebody cuts me off. This is my default mode when the sweet picture of the kid goes off the screen and I go back to being down.

Even though the kinds of distress differ, there is a common thread. When we're in the darkness, God feels absent. That's what the Psalmist is saying. The Psalmist felt it. Remember, he said,

- ⁷ "Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?
⁸ Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
⁹ Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

Some scholars read this passage and think, "Oh, those are just rhetorical questions that are meant to build up your faith. The Psalmist is really saying, 'Of course not! Of course, God hasn't forgotten me.'" I think they're crazy. These questions aren't rhetorical. This guy is struggling with questions like we are. He wonders where God is. Read the text. Listen to your life. Aren't there times when those are your questions, when you wonder where God is? We all feel alone in the dark. Everybody! And if you haven't yet, you will.

Probably the most famous Christian academic of the last century was C. S. Lewis. He becomes a Christian. His books change tens of millions of lives. He writes a book on pain and a book on suffering and they are best-selling theological books. He gets married for the first time when he's 58. His wife dies when he's 60 and it changes his relationship with God. He writes a book, *A Grief Observed*. Lewis says,

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted 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. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can

this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?

Everybody feels that. Part of being in a church is the ability to say to others, "I have felt like that" or "I have a friend or a spouse or a sibling or a coworker who feels like that and I don't know how to help." The first thing that the Psalms of Lament, the prayers for impossible days, teach us is that we are in the darkness to tell God, to face it with God instead of pretending. John Ortberg writes a book, *God Is Closer Than You Think*, and he says when Israel wrote the Psalms of Lament there were a bunch of other cultures and religions that wrote out their prayers, too, but Israel was the only one that included prayers of complaint. Why would that be? Ortberg says,

. . . only Israel in all the ancient world believed that the great God who made the heavens and the earth cares that we are in pain and he can be expected to something about it.

God doesn't want you to hold back. This is the time you most need to be honest. Jerry Sittser, a professor at Whitworth University out West, wrote what I think is maybe the best book on grief that I've ever read. It's called *A Grace Disguised*. It's a great book because he talks out of experience about God and grief. One night he is on the way home from a family trip with his wife and his mom and their four children and a drunk driver comes across the center line of the road and hits them head-on. In minutes Jerry lost his wife, his mother, and his little baby girl Diana and became a single father to three small children. He goes through all the emotions that you could imagine, but he said that the one that kept surprising him was how angry he was. He said, "I was so angry. I'm one of the good guys." He writes this.

A few friends cautioned me about [my] anger, but I assumed that God was big enough to tolerate my anger and compassionate enough to understand. If God was patient with Job, I reasoned, he would be patient with me too. Besides, my anger was problem enough in itself, for I knew that anger can turn easily into bitterness. I did not want to exacerbate the problem by believing that God was so fragile that he could not absorb my anger but would turn against me instead. I found comfort in many of the Psalms that express anguish and anger before God. I see now that my faith was becoming an ally rather than an enemy because I could vent anger freely, even toward God, without fearing retribution.

Jerry is right. God is big enough to handle your yelling at Him. This is what Pastor Amy Carlan says.

We humans don't like pain, and we have all sorts of clever ways to avoid it: we flat out deny it, we mask it with anger, we dull it through addictions, we pretend it doesn't matter, we isolate ourselves, we cover it up with busyness. In the long-run, ignoring pain hurts us and those around us more than dealing with it. It's like getting a splinter. It hurts but, boy oh boy, the needle that could get the splinter out is unpleasant. And so we avoid the needle and distract ourselves from the pain of the splinter. But what happens if the splinter stays? It begins to throb. Every day it gets a little worse, until the skin is festering, infected, and the pain is almost unbearable. Soon the infected splinter keeps us from doing our normal activity and our pain leads us to snap at other people. This is what it's like when we don't deal with the pain and the sadness in our lives.

God knows we've got to tell somebody. We're Americans. Our common call is *don't just sit there. Do something about it.* But the Psalms of Lament, the prayers of complaint, often say not to do something. Just sit there. The person is still dead. You still lost your job. You still lost your house. Sometimes that's as far as you could go that day and you say, "God, this blank-blank-blank stinks." Most of the prayers of lament don't just stop there but that's where they all start.

Most of the prayers of lament are like Psalm 77. The Psalmist remembers that God is out there but that doesn't always make it better. If God is out there, how come God hasn't made it better? He says,

¹⁰ Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.

¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

¹⁵ With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

¹⁹ Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.

The Psalmist is talking about how God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Remember how He split the Red Sea? It defined the relationship that God had with all of Israel. It assured them that there was a God and that they were God's people and that God would be with them now just as He was back then. When we remember the defining moments, it doesn't change things but it changes us.

Those of us in this room are here in part because we want to have a different defining moment. Our relationship with God is through the person of Jesus. God the Father sent the Son to earth to live like a human being and He experienced every human emotion that we ever struggle with—grief at the death of His loved ones, loneliness when no one understood Him, betrayal by a close friend, disappointment when His family thought He was crazy, sorrow when his friends abandoned him in His time of need, physical pain as He hung on the cross. And in that moment, He experienced the dark night of the soul when God feels absent. Remember when Jesus was on the cross and said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was quoting a Psalm of Lament, Psalm 22.

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus understands the darkness. One of the names for Jesus is *man of sorrows*. A lot of times when we think we have done something wrong and feel like God is far away, in reality God is right there with us in the dark even though the Psalmist says, "He made a path but His footprints are not seen." I believe that the resurrection of Jesus gives us a long-term view of suffering. I believe that the world with all its pain and tragedy and suffering is not the end of the story. Jesus Himself says,

³³ In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."
[John 16:33]

It's not a solution. It is not "Take two of these and it will be better in the morning." It's not "Well, you really need to have more faith." Literally, for God's sake, don't say that to somebody. But it makes a difference if Jesus assures you that God is for you and that God is always with you, especially if you don't feel His presence or see His footprints. The prayers of lament lead us to a place where we should remember Jesus and focus on Jesus and sing to Jesus and read about Jesus and talk to Jesus and ask others to remind us about Jesus. When we are in the darkness, the prayers of lament teach us that God is there.

Last thought on this: The Psalm ends in Verse 20. It says,

²⁰ You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

As part of God's rescue operation to people who sit in the darkness, God uses people. It was the hands of Moses and Aaron back then. I think God *still* uses people. In His rescue operation when we are in the darkness, we need even more of the care of other people. So today if you have a friend you know is in the dark or walking into the dark, you need to hear that they need friends who will be persistent with them. People who are in the dark keep pushing friends away but they need them more than ever, not for advice but just to sit with them. If that's you, if you are in the darkness today, I pray that you will have the courage to reach out to somebody, to a counselor or a friend. The Bible says to weep with those who weep.

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep [Romans 12:15].

God is walking with us and He sends people to walk with us. William Stringfellow spoke of the bleeding heart. What a great picture of the church. I think the church is at its best when it is a fellowship of the bleeding heart.

I talked about Jerry Sittser's book, *A Grace Disguised*. He tells this story about shortly after the accident when everybody died. He had had one of these daydreams. You know how you get to the office or you're sitting in a chair and all of a sudden you have a daydream. He has one of these daydreams and he says,

I dreamed of a setting sun. I was frantically running west, trying desperately to catch it and remain in its fiery warmth and light. But I was losing the race. The sun was beating me to the horizon and was soon gone. I suddenly found myself in the twilight. Exhausted, I stopped running and glanced with foreboding over my shoulder to the east. I saw a vast darkness closing in on me. I was terrified by the darkness. I wanted to keep running after the sun, though I knew it was futile, it had already proven itself faster than I was. So I lost all hope, collapsed to the ground, and fell into despair.

Because this daydream keeps coming to him, Jerry shares it with his sister. She listens and then she says, "Jerry, I know you know that the quickest way to reach the light of day is not to chase after it but to stop and turn around and head to the darkness so that the sunrise comes to *you* on the other side." She was right, not just for Jerry but for all of us. We cannot outrun the dark. That's part of the human experience. You can't catch the darkness but you can face the dark because, feel it or not, God is with us. God has been there all along and God will bring us through. The sunrise is on the other side. A lot of times we are better at seeing the pain of other

people after we have been through this prayer of complaint. We can see people's pain better and find that there are special times where just for a moment, we can offer hope.

We put barbed wire around the He Knows Your Name letters today on World Communion Sunday because pain often pushes us away from God. But we believe that stronger than the barbed wire, stronger even than the pain, is the God who comes in Jesus and says, "I'm here. This is what you need. This My body. This is how much I got hurt, broken for you. When you feel at the end of your rope, remember this is My blood poured out for you. As often as you eat this and drink this, you remember Me until I come again."

Whether you are in the light of joy or in the darkness of despair today, come to the table. Our pattern here is that we go to one of the stations, take a piece of the bread and dip it into the cup and then go around the other side back to your seat. If this is not your day, just sit there and let the music be God's gift to you. Join with us in the fellowship of the bleeding heart and let the King give us the food of heaven.

Great thanks to Amy Carlan Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to John Ortberg and to Jerry Sittser.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.