

Writing Our Own Laments

In the Bible, **lament** is the form whereby followers of God express their struggles and questions. It is a way to challenge God and yet, remain entirely faithful. It is a way to address reality instead of sugar-coat it. And believe it or not, it is a way through the tough times, instead of trying to side-step them. This quote from *Samuel Balentine* speaks to this:

“The church taught me how to pray, and more subtly, how not to pray. One was to praise God, but not protest; to petition God, but not interrogate; and in all things to accept and submit to the sometimes incomprehensible will of God, never challenge or rebel. Yet when life’s circumstances would not permit either such passivity or such piety, this advocacy of a rather monotonous relation to God seemed destined to silence if not exclude me and, I suspected, other struggling questioners from the ranks of the truly committed, the genuinely faithful. “You must not question God.” If one cannot question God, then to whom does one direct the questions?”

What about you? What have you been taught about questioning and protesting in prayer? Throughout history, the faithful have marched to the throne of God and cried out their pain. For instance, at least 50 of the 150 Psalms are *psalms of lament*. In addition, Lamentations and larger portions of Jeremiah contain lament. There is a biblical pattern here worth noting. Some people believe that it’s an Old Testament relic that we can disregard now that we have Jesus. But Jesus left again! We are awaiting his return when his Kingdom will fully come. Until then, we always have reason to lament. The world is not as it should be.

Will you give lament a try? Will you wrestle with God about things that are not as they should be? The guide on the next page will help you follow the structure of a typical biblical lament.

To engage this work, you simply need to call to mind something worth lamenting. To aid in that process, consider the types of loss that may have affected you or your family or your church or your community:

1. **Material** – The loss of an object or of surroundings with important value
2. **Relational** – The loss of the emotional or physical presence of another person
3. **Intrapsychic** – An experience of loss entirely within the self; for instance, the death of an image of oneself or of a dream of the future
4. **Functional** – The loss of muscular or neurological functions of the body
5. **Role** – The loss of a specific social role or of an accustomed place within a social network
6. **Systemic** – The loss that occurs when a system changes and no longer operates as it used to

Writing a Biblical Lament

Biblical Guide	Your Personal Lament
<p>Address to God: The address to God is usually a brief cry for help, asking desperately for God to listen. It is usually personal in nature, "<u>My</u> God." Sometimes it includes a statement of praise or a recollection of God's intervention in the past (Ps 71:1-3)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>See also Psalm 5:1-3, 56:1-2, 88:1-2, 102:1-2</i></p>	
<p>Complaint/Wailing/Protest (i.e., the Lament): God is "informed" about various troubles we experiencing. These are often overstated to get God's attention and persuade God to act. (Ps 71:4 & 7 & 10-11).</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>See also Psalm 6:2-3,6-7; 13:1-2, 31:11-13, 56:5-6, and nearly all of Psalm 88.</i></p>	
<p>Confession of trust: The psalmist expresses confidence in God despite the circumstances and begins to see his or her problems differently (Ps 71:5-8).</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>See also Psalm 22:3-5, 31:14-15, 56:8-11</i></p>	
<p>Petition: Filled with confidence in God, the psalmist appeals to God for deliverance and intervention. The psalmist might offer reasons why God should intervene, often suggesting that God's honor is at stake. (Ps 71:4, 9, 12-13, 17-18).</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>See also Psalm 6:4-5, 13:3-4, 56:7</i></p>	
<p>Words of assurance: The psalmist expresses certainty that the petition will be heard by God and sometimes, that the unfaithful will not be so fortunate. "I will be heard; they will surely be punished." (Ps 71:14, 19-21)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>See also Psalm 6:8-9, 56:10-11, 102:12-17</i></p>	
<p>Praise, or Vow to praise: The lament concludes with the psalmist's vow to bear witness to God's intervention. The hurt having been expressed, the mood now changes to joy and anticipation of praise. (Ps 71:15-16, 22-24).</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>See also Psalm 3:8, 13:5-6, 31:21-24, 56:12-13, 102:18-22</i></p>	

Once you have used the table to compose some of the pieces, you will need to transition to a blank piece of paper so that you can write out the whole thing. Your first composition will be nothing more than a draft, so don't expect it to be perfect.

Instead, notice the process. What did God do in you and to you and through you as you navigated the six sections?

People often find that they experience catharsis. When they face it, God helps them name it and tame it. Left to their own devices, they might not even take the time to reflect with God. But having done so, God provided some measure of emotional relief and altered perspective.

Take some time and edit what you have created. Rearrange the order so that it makes sense to you. Ensure that it expresses the longings in your soul. You can ask yourself, "Have I been completely honest? Am I holding something back from God? Does this language resonate with what's really happening inside me?" Edit the lines or add new lines so that you've truly included the six elements listed above.

Finally, pray this lament to God. Truly *pray* it. Express yourself to God!

AND, perhaps take one extra step outside your comfort zone: share your lament with someone else.