

WRITING YOUR OWN (BIBLICAL) LAMENT

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.

“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 monotonic 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?”

~Samuel Balentine

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 expressed their anguish. For instance, all of the following may be considered *Psalms of Lament*: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 51, 52, 54, 56, 59, 60, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71, 74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 86, 88, 89, 90, 140, 141, 142, 143

If you want to express anguish, you might want to follow their example. 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, your family, your church, or your community:

- **Material** – The loss of an object or of surroundings with important value
- **Relational** – The loss of the emotional or physical presence of another human being
- **Intrapsychic** – An experience of loss entirely within the self; for instance, the shattering of an image of you had of yourself or the death of a dream of the future
- **Functional** – The loss of muscular or neurological functions of the body
- **Role** – The loss of a specific social role or of an accustomed place within a social network
- **Systemic** – The loss that occurs when a system changes and no longer operates as before

When you have something in mind, follow the table below to compose the individual pieces of lament. After filling the table, 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.

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 all six elements of a biblical lament.

Finally, pray your 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!

WRITING A LAMENT WITH PSALM 71 AS YOUR GUIDE

BIBLICAL GUIDE	YOUR PERSONAL LAMENT
<p style="text-align: center;">ADDRESS TO GOD</p> <p>The address to God is usually a brief cry for help, asking desperately for God to listen. It is usually personal in nature, “<i>My</i> God.” Sometimes it includes a statement of praise or a recollection of God’s intervention in the past (Ps 71:1-3) <i>See also Psalm 5:1-3, 56:1-2, 88:1-2, 102:1-2</i></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">COMPLAINT/PROTEST (i.e., the Lament)</p> <p>God is “informed” about various troubles we are experiencing. These are often overstated to get God’s attention and persuade God to act. (Ps 71:4 & 7 & 10-11). <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 style="text-align: center;">CONFESSION OF TRUST</p> <p>The psalmist expresses confidence in God despite the circumstances and begins to see his or her problems differently (Ps 71:5-8). <i>See also Psalm 22:3-5, 31:14-15, 56:8-11</i></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">PETITION</p> <p>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). <i>See also Psalm 6:4-5, 13:3-4, 56:7</i></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">WORDS OF ASSURANCE</p> <p>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) <i>See also Psalm 6:8-9, 56:10-11, 102:12-17</i></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">PRAISE, OR VOW TO PRAISE</p> <p>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). <i>See also Psalm 3:8, 13:5-6, 31:21-24, 56:12-13, 102:18-22</i></p>	