

## **Lament Writing Exercise**

*“He that lacks time to mourn, lacks time to mend.”*

*-Sir Henry Taylor*

In the midst of our lives and work, we inevitably rub up against experiences, stories, statistics, and dark truths that produce a complex mix of emotions within us. Such emotional intensity often leads to a loss of words, or a feeling of paralysis. During these moments it can be helpful to rely not on our own stuttering speech, but on the reliable and relevant laments of the Hebrew Scriptures.

A lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow that the writer has experienced or observed. In lament, we do not hide from the tension of tragedy, or pretend to have it all together before God. We bring our most intense and disturbed theological questions right into God’s presence. In lament, vague half-hearted wonderings (“We would like to ask you why this might be happening.”) are transformed to bold and honest speech (“How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?”). In lament, we express solidarity with the wronged. Our questions and protests honor the legitimate suffering we and others are experiencing.

Lament also inevitably looks to the future. Because we have a God who listens to us, and whose heart is unquestionably moved by injustice, our cries and petitions can be followed by statements of trust, even as our hearts are breaking. It may not always feel possible to sing praise in times of despair, yet we can anticipate praise even as we yearn for an end to violence and impunity. When we come to God in our need, he often reminds us of his tender love, his seeing eye, and his powerful presence. He is the one who bears the weight of injustice. He has overcome evil. He has a plan for his people. He is active and moving amongst us. We can trust him. We do not need to fear anything. Lament can help us rediscover order in the midst of chaos.

### **The Structure of Lament**

Psalmic laments can have up to seven parts, although not all parts are present in every lament, and the ordering of the parts is often unique to each psalm. On the back of this sheet, you will find the basic structure of a lament with examples of each part from scripture. You will also find questions within each section, to help you formulate your own lament. The invitation from God is to be free and transparent—to speak the deepest emotions of your heart. You can choose to share your lament with others, but you will in no way be expected to do so.

For examples of laments in the Old Testament, or to pray the scriptures, take a look at the following Psalms: 13, 22, 25, 26, 27:7-14, 42, 43, 71. (There are many, many more.)

## ***Write your own lament***

Your own lament can be a simple and powerful prayer expressing your complaint to God and asking for specific help. You don't need to labor over this for a long time. One or two simple, clear lines per category below is all it takes.

**1. Address God directly**

"O Lord", "Mighty King", "Lover of Justice"...

- *What role does God play in this situation? What name do you ascribe to him?*

**2. A review of God's Faithfulness in the Past**

"For he divided the sea and led them through, making the water stand up like walls". (78)

- *How has God been faithful to you in the past? How has he shown up?*

**3. The Complaint**

"I am forgotten, cut off from your care. You have thrown me into the lowest pit and the darkest depths." (88)

- *What is the source of your grief, sorrow or anger? What painful situation is before you? (Feel free to be specific here and include more than just a couple of sentences if it helps.)*

**4. A Confession of Sin or Claim of Innocence**

"Because of your great compassion blot out the stain of my sin." (51) "O Lord my God I have done wrong." (7) "I have kept the ways of the Lord; I have not turned from my God to follow evil. I am blameless before God." (18)

- *Is there anything within you that aches for forgiveness? How have you failed to trust and obey God, or conversely, in what ways have you been faithful?*

**5. A Request for Help**

"Listen to my prayer O God, do not ignore my cry for help! Please listen and answer me, for I am overwhelmed by my troubles." (55)

- *What specific thing are you asking God to do? In what ways do you long to see Him move?*

**6. A Declaration of the Response/Character of God**

"But you have been our king from the beginning, O God; You have saved us many times." (74)

- *Recount the ways in which God has responded to your suffering in the past. What evidence do you have that he will show up again? Who do you know God to be based on your experiences with him?*

**7. A Vow to Praise/Statement of Trust in God**

"The Lord has heard my plea; The Lord will answer my prayer." (6) "Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again- My Savior and my God. Now I am deeply discouraged but I will remember You." (42) I love the Lord because He hears my voice and my prayer for mercy. Because he bends down to listen I will pray as long as I have breath!" (116)

- *Looking beyond your current circumstances, what are the reasons God is nevertheless worthy of praise and trust? Articulate these as clearly and honestly as you can.*