

Hearing and Holding an Afflicted Heart

Oh God, you are my God! I seek you!
I am feeling heavy and tired,
I am troubled and empty.
From this place of pain I cry out to you!
I have never felt so sad,
I am totally overwhelmed,
I am facing despair.
People around me say,
“You’ll feel better tomorrow.”
They say I lack faith,
they are irritated with me and say,
“Pull yourself together!”
I hear the other voices of people saying
“Stupid, idiot, dumb, birdbrain.”

I call out to you because nobody else understands me,
nobody cares for me but you.
I can’t move, I feel paralyzed.
I need your help!
If I don’t receive your help,
I have no reason to live.
I can’t go on living like this.

Oh, you are my God, you are with me!
You hold me, you encourage me,
you are the one who is there for me at rock bottom.
Jesus weeps in the garden with me.
Jesus knows what it is like to feel forsaken.
My God is mighty to save,
God touches me and makes me whole.

Were you there for me?
Yes, you were!
You say to me,
“Come unto me all you who labour and are heavy-laden,
and I will give you rest.”
You have plans for me,
plans for good and not for evil.
You give me a hope and purpose.
I will always praise you,
for you are my God,
my Rock and my Redeemer.

This psalm for those living with mental illness was written by a group of people with mood disorders.¹ As I read this psalm and as I thought about our focus on mental health these past few weeks, I began to think of the parable of the sower in a different way.² Jesus explained that the soil represents a person's readiness to hear and receive, to share and live out the love of God and the good news Jesus was bringing. And so I wonder:

- Why is the ground so hard that the seeds are exposed for birds to eat them? Could traumatic experiences cause a person to guard their heart so much that nothing can sink in? Maybe the birds eating the seed are the events, circumstances, and people that are the source of the trauma.
- Why is there so little soil among all the rocks? Could depression be hampering a person's ability to open up a space for God?
- What are the thorns and weeds that choke out any growth? Could anxieties and obsessive compulsions be crowding out God's voice? Maybe the weeds that choke the seedlings are all the other voices – real and imagined, internal and external – that many people hear.

Part of preparing good soil for the love of God and the good news of Jesus to take root in us is to tend to our mental health. This is the purpose of the series we began three weeks ago – to suggest psalms and songs that we can use – along with medication, therapy, and other forms of treatment – to address mental illness and improve mental health.

Psalm 102 describes itself as a lament.³ According to the *New Revised Standard Version*, the psalm is “A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the LORD.” In the *New Living Translation*, we find this description, “A prayer of one overwhelmed with trouble, pouring out problems before the LORD.” *The Message* states it bluntly. Psalm 102 is “A prayer of one whose life is falling to pieces, and who lets God know just how bad it is.” You could use this psalm in a variety of circumstances – when experiencing grief or anger or pain of any type – physical, emotional, mental.

Let's read the first 11 verses of Psalm 102 from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

¹ Hear my prayer, O LORD;
let my cry come to you.

² Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my distress.

Incline your ear to me;
answer me speedily in the day when I call.

³ For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.

⁴ My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.

⁵ Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.

⁶ I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.

⁷ I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

⁸ All day long my enemies taunt me;
those who deride me use my name for a curse.

¹ © Carol Penner, [Psalm for those living with mental illness - leadinginworship \(typepad.com\)](http://leadinginworship.typepad.com)

² Mark 4:1-20

³ Background on Psalm 102 drawn from James H. Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 492-496 and Walter Brueggemann, Introduction to *Psalms of Lament* by Ann Weems, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

⁹ For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,
¹⁰ because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside.
¹¹ My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.

Psalm 102 begins with an afflicted person pouring out their problems, crying to God for help. A lament usually begins by naming God in an intimate way such as “My God” or “God of my fathers.” The complaint is not made to a stranger. It’s set in the middle of an ongoing relationship of trust. It’s addressed to a sovereign friend who is listening. If you were to write a lament, how would it begin? How would you address God? Begin writing your personal lament right now.

Psalm 102 continues with a list of complaints: a deteriorating body, loneliness, desolation, and sleeplessness. A lament tells God, in some detail, how troubled life is and what the trouble is. The complaint usually engages in hyperbole, much as a child does with a small hurt in order to get attention from a busy adult. Overstatement is not unusual for a person in pain. It’s also a strategy to get God’s attention and persuade God to act. What are your complaints? Why are you sad? Why are you angry? What is causing you pain?

Enemies who taunt add to the feelings of isolation. What are your enemies? Who are your enemies? Are they outside forces or do they come from within?

The psalmist expresses the common understanding in ancient times of sickness as the result of sin and God’s punishment for sin. Today we know the causes of many illnesses, mental as well as physical. Choices and actions have consequences on our health but there isn’t a direct correlation between sin and illness. However, it is important to name the things that separate us from God, from each other, and from inner wholeness. What do you have to confess to God and to yourself?

Read the beginning of Psalm 102 again, this time from the *New Living Translation*.

¹ LORD, hear my prayer!
Listen to my plea!
² Don’t turn away from me
in my time of distress.
Bend down to listen,
and answer me quickly when I call to you.
³ For my days disappear like smoke,
and my bones burn like red-hot coals.
⁴ My heart is sick, withered like grass,
and I have lost my appetite.
⁵ Because of my groaning,
I am reduced to skin and bones.
⁶ I am like an owl in the desert,
like a little owl in a far-off wilderness.
⁷ I lie awake,
lonely as a solitary bird on the roof.
⁸ My enemies taunt me day after day.
They mock and curse me.
⁹ I eat ashes for food.
My tears run down into my drink
¹⁰ because of your anger and wrath.
For you have picked me up and thrown me out.
¹¹ My life passes as swiftly as the evening shadows.
I am withering away like grass.

Song: *Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying*

The second section of Psalm 102 is a hymn of praise and a prayer to God for restoration. Read it from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

- ¹² But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations.
- ¹³ You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favor it;
the appointed time has come.
- ¹⁴ For your servants hold its stones dear,
and have pity on its dust.
- ¹⁵ The nations will fear the name of the LORD,
and all the kings of the earth your glory.
- ¹⁶ For the LORD will build up Zion;
he will appear in his glory.
- ¹⁷ He will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and will not despise their prayer.
- ¹⁸ Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet unborn may praise the LORD:
- ¹⁹ that he looked down from his holy height,
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,
- ²⁰ to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die;
- ²¹ so that the name of the LORD may be declared in Zion,
and his praise in Jerusalem,
- ²² when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.
- ²³ He has broken my strength in midcourse;
he has shortened my days.
- ²⁴ "O my God," I say, "do not take me away
at the midpoint of my life,
you whose years endure
throughout all generations."
- ²⁵ Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
- ²⁶ They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like clothing, and they pass away;
- ²⁷ but you are the same, and your years have no end.
- ²⁸ The children of your servants shall live secure;
their offspring shall be established in your presence.

Even as despair abounds, the writer rebounds with emphatic words of trust and praise. The Lord is still king. The psalmist comforts himself and those who hear the prayer, not with God's deeds in the past, but with those anticipated in the future. The prayer includes a moment of unease concerning the brevity of life, but then returns to confident statements about the greatness of God the Lord, the everlasting one, the creator. The Lord will endure. The eternal God will be the security of future generations.

Let's return to your personal psalm. A lament usually comes to its focus with petition. The lament addresses God with loud, large demands. God can do great things, if only God can be mobilized. What do you want God to do – for you, for your loved ones, for the world?

Next, a lament adds motivations to the petition. The speaker seeks to give God some good reasons for acting. The motivations appeal to virtue, to repentance, to precedent, to God's honor, and even God's vanity. The speaker often assumes that human need isn't enough, God must be shown that something is at stake for God in the trouble as well. The motivations aren't always respectable or respectful. But it's not unusual for hurting people to express themselves in this way. Why should God do what you want? Be direct. Be honest.

A lament continues by asking for vengeance. In addition to asking for good, these poems often include a wish for doing something destructive to an adversary. These poems are extreme. They don't demonstrate noble human intention. Instead, they show what is most unacceptable in theology and social relations. These are the verses we're tempted to leave out when reading the psalms in public worship. What do you wish on your adversaries? It's alright to tell God what you'd like to see happen. My advice is to leave it up to God and not take the action into your own hands.

At the end of a lament something unexpected happens. The mood and the tone of the psalm change. The lament ends in rejoicing and praise. The psalmist's anger and protest appear to be spent. Pain moves to a positive resolution. The speaker gains confidence in God's willingness to hear and to act. The reason for this change of tone isn't apparent. It may be that the loud protest is cathartic, and for the psalmist, expressing the complaint is enough. The poem resolves a need. The speaker is, at the end of the poem, in a very different place. What would you include in your statement of trust in God? For what do you praise God?

Take a moment to continue to work on your lament.

Psalms of lament, represented by the psalms we've been reading together these last few weeks, are courageous and daring acts of faith. In place of our denial, pretending that "all is well," laments boldly recognize that all is not right in the world. Instead of being docile before God, laments identify "enemies" to blame. They hold God accountable for what is failed, dysfunctional, and unjust. Instead of accepting easy clichés conventionally ascribed to God, laments seize the initiative and dictate what God must do. The psalmists believe that intervention, transformation, and miracle will not happen without such complaints and demands. Will God work without human involvement? Laments say no. Can humans solve all life's problems without God? Laments say no.

Psalms of lament provide us with a pattern of prayer for desperate times.⁴ We don't hide our misery from God. We don't pretend that all is well. Instead, we name our grief, acknowledge our misery, and shed tears. Naming our woes and crying out to God opens a pathway to new awareness of God's presence. This can be especially true when we lament together in the community of faith, writing or singing our own psalms. God's healing grace becomes real, and we find strength to continue to be faithful in the midst of struggle. I encourage you to read your lament out loud to God and, if you feel safe doing so, share it with at least one other person.

A modern example of lament can be found in the collected prayers of Ann Weems.⁵ Ann's son Todd died less than an hour after his 21st birthday. In the years following that loss, she voiced her continuing grief, rage, and faith in a series of harrowing and beautiful psalms of lament.

In the preface to her book, Weems writes: *Of course, I know my psalms are not finished. Anger and alleluias careen around within me, sometimes colliding. Lamenting and laughter sit side by side in a heart that yearns for peace that passes understanding. Those who believe in the midst of their weeping will know where I stand.*

Read one of her laments.

⁴ Karmen Krahn and Marlene Kropf, "Send Our Roots Rain: Resources for a Six-part Worship Series on the Psalms," *Leader: Summer 2015*, MennoMedia, p.30.

⁵ Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

Lament Psalm 5

by Ann Weems

O God, find me!
I am lost
in the valley of grief,
and I cannot see my way out.

My friends leave baskets of balm
at my feet,
but I cannot bend to touch
the healing
to my heart.
They call me to leave
this valley,
but I cannot follow
the faint sound
of their voices.
They sing their songs
of love,
but the words fade
and vanish in the wind.
They knock,
but I cannot find the door.
They shout to me,
but I cannot find the voice
to answer.

O God, find me!
Come into this valley
and find me!
Bring me out of this land
of weeping.
O you to whom I belong,
find me!
I will wait here,
for you have never failed
to come to me.
I will wait here,
for you have always been faithful.
I will wait here,
for you are my God,
and you have promised
that you counted the hairs on my head.

Song: *Nothing Is Lost on the Breath of God*

Psalms of lament teach us to pray our inner conflicts and contradictions. They allow us to shout out our complaints to God. They give us permission to shake our fist at God one moment, break into praise the next, and repeat the process as often as is necessary. Use them as you tell your truth to God. God will hear it. God will hold it. Thanks be to God.