

Praising God Saves Me In My Pain

In the face of illness, death, and disability, Lamentations gives me a script for how to suffer.

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In 2015, my husband and I opened the doors to our church plant, Renewal Church. We celebrated the tremendous movement of God in our lives and our neighborhood. But the very same week, I woke up inexplicably unable to walk. I couldn't put any pressure on my legs whatsoever. I didn't know at the time that this surprising illness-visitor would become a long-term tenant.

I now experience health issues so disruptive that my husband, Kevin, on more than one occasion has had to carry me around the house. While I suffer from the physical discomfort of this mysterious illness, Kevin suffers too. He made the "in sickness" vow before God and all of our friends and family without really knowing what that might one day entail. Here it is—come to collect. Come to test if we are truly people of our vows.

As if that's not enough, there's also the unresolved search through Crater Lake, Oregon, for a loved one, my cousin and dear friend Cameron. Park rangers have found remnants, clues: a coat, broken branches on the side of a cliff, snowshoe prints near a well-traveled photo spot—a place where many hikers before him have gone and returned safely. But not Cam. We held his funeral in an airport hangar. Photos in lieu of a coffin. Unanswered questions instead of resolution.

And still this: our youngest son's developmental issues. His spinal-cord surgery and ongoing aftercare. His life-threatening allergies. Weeks at the local children's hospital, months of therapy.

During this season of pain and loss, there's a voice in my head—some combination of pastor, parent, and professor—that says I need to handle this suffering and handle it well. Learn whatever lesson God is trying to teach me so that I can graduate on to the next stage of spiritual maturity. Be brave. Be strong. Be an example to others.

And yet I don't know how to hold these two opposing truths in my hands at the same time: Evil is evil, and God is good and in control over it all. I don't want to admit that I might have to learn to hold God's sovereignty and my own suffering in tension. I don't believe God is the agent of pain, evil, or death, but I don't know how to make sense of God also being the one who didn't stop pain, evil, or death from happening to me or those I love. This is not an ontological argument about God and the existence of evil. I'm a real person with real faith wrestling with real pain. And it's very difficult. So in these early days of struggle, I'm doing everything I can to avoid my conflicting emotions in order to prove how okay and optimistic I am.

Where there wasn't one before, a demarcation exists now, a dividing of my life: before and after. How do I learn to stop pretending and avoiding? How do I learn to exist in this, my new epoch?

As I make sense of suffering, the Book of Lamentations has given me a roadmap, a way through the wilderness.

At the very center of Lamentations we find chapter 3, by far the longest chapter. It is the physical and emotional climax of the book, the heart of Jeremiah's lament, and the place where the prophet's cry is most personal and passionate. Just before he seems to give up, something significant happens. In chapter 3 verse 21, Jeremiah hammers his stake into the ground. "Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope," he declares. "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (3:21–23).

Here, Jeremiah utters the most powerful word in all of Lamentations: *yet*.

Yet is the moment the prophet moves from his painful laments—his cries of *how could this happen?*—to his only hope. His *yet* is found in the unchanging, steadfast love of God, and through this *yet*, he declares, "Even if this suffering never ends, I will always worship God."

For us, too, *yet* is the paradigm shift of all laments. It arises even when the cancer isn't cured, when the debt never decreases, when the questions aren't answered. *Yet* believes that even if it doesn't go well with us, Jesus is still enough. *Yet* is the fighter's prize. It hopes in God, for God's sake alone. "In the darkness we have a choice that is not really there in better times," writes Timothy Keller in his treatise on grief and suffering. "We can choose to serve God just because he is God. ... If we do that—we are finally learning to love God for himself, and not for his benefits."

All laments lead to the truest form of worship—the worship of God alone. Not God and blessings, not God and benefits, but God for God's sake. No matter God's apparent absence and no matter what happens, lament utters a profound *yet*: "This is horrible. Yet I will praise my God, for he alone is worthy." Or in Jeremiah's words, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him" (Lam. 3:24).

Here, though, is the hope of all laments: Generations after the events of Lamentations, Jesus left the comfort of heaven and entered Jerusalem's long years of suffering. He voluntarily became both the object and subject of lament. In taking upon himself the consequences for all of our sin, the penalty for the world's idolatry, the power of death—and in taking on the principalities and forces of darkness—Jesus didn't hesitate. Instead, he willingly bore the full weight of it on the cross. After years of longing, after generations of lament—through the suffering of their very own King—the Israelites were, as we are, healed.

In my own lament journey, something new has now begun: another expression of illness. My hands and arms, up to the elbows, have started to go numb. I call them my "dead fish arms." I'm getting electromyography tests, cortisone shots, and occupational therapy, but something is not adding up. There will always be mystery in lament, I suppose. And yet my hope in suffering is not found by striving to see the positive or looking on the bright side. For me and for every Christian, it's about the *object* of our hope, the one all laments long for and lead to, the embodiment of our laments: Jesus.

By his suffering, we are saved in ours.

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