

Whatever Happened to Lamentation?

The prophets of old knew the meaning and power of godly grieving. It still has a place in the lives of God's people.

While indexing some articles recently, I ran across an unusual story, "The Lament of an Indonesian Rape Victim," which told of a woman's struggle to come to terms with her assault and mutilation by a mob. Furious with God, this woman had stopped praying, but she later found comfort in the Bible when she read about the trials of the Israelites in the book of Lamentations.

The article concluded in this way: "She still does not go to church, for one very simple reason: churchgoers cannot handle a lament. This struck me when I went to a famous central London church the following Sunday. All the songs were of victory and triumph, militaristic, confident, loud.

"I saw for the first time how hard it would be for someone like her to come into church and simply lament. Everyone would crowd around trying to perk her up or tire of her gloom and mutter about her 'negative spirit.'"

Most Christians think that being spiritual means always being "up." We assume that if we are upset with God, angry at injustice or grieving over a loss, we somehow have lost the faith.

We forget that lamenting is part of the Bible. It is part of our faith, and it is part of the persecuted church. So why do we tend to ignore our suffering brothers and sisters or shy

away from sharing their testimonies of courage? Isn't it because their stories don't always end in triumph?

I often have felt badly about weeping over the world's weighty issues. One shouldn't live in doom and gloom, and I acknowledge my pessimism can be taken to an extreme. Nevertheless, I think the Western church's penchant for sunny optimism can be extreme as well.

Consider the fact that:

- * More than 70 million Christians the world over have been martyred in the last 20 centuries.

- * Trusted church workers steal some \$16 billion annually from church funds.

- * Christians spend more on annual audits (\$810 million) than on all workers in the non-Christian world.

- * There are 500 million orphans in the world and 70 million abandoned children and infants.

- * Worldwide, 200 million children are exploited for labor.

- * Even in the year 2002, 35 million people are still slaves.

- * As many as 120,000 prisoners are being tortured.

- * Pedophile racketeers victimize some 5.8 million children.

* There are 24 million prostitutes.

* Every year, about \$47 billion worth of cocaine is sold in the world.

**Approximately 250 million women are battered in their homes each year.

What is your reaction to these horrible statistics? What is the reaction of people around you? Do you say, "Oh, yes, it's horrible, but there's nothing I can really do about it"?

I agree that it is difficult for one person to solve these problems. But let me suggest a first step that anyone can do: Lament it.

What is a lamentation? It is not necessarily a declaration of personal responsibility, although in some cases it may include that.

To lament is to express sorrow, mourning or regret, often demonstratively. It also means "to mourn or wail." Another definition is "to deplore."

We don't use these words often in the church today. For example, what does it mean to mourn?

My dictionary says it means: (1) to feel or express grief or sorrow; (2) to show the customary signs of grief for a death, such as wearing mourning clothes; (3) to murmur mournfully;

(4) to feel or express grief or sorrow for.

To wail means: (1) to express sorrow audibly; (2) to make a sound suggestive of a mournful cry; (3) to express dissatisfaction plaintively, or to complain. (Have you expressed audible sorrow to God lately?)

To deplore means: (1) to feel or express grief for; (2) to regret strongly; (3) to consider unfortunate or deserving of deprecation.

To lament, then, is first to feel God's heart of sorrow for something that is terrible—to weep with His tears, to wail with His cries, to put one's arms around someone else, even if only spiritually, and cry with them. To lament is to stand in the gap and say: "Yes, I agree, this is terrible. Let me comfort you."

Are we unwilling to lament something for fear we will be called to do something about it?

Further, to lament is to express dissatisfaction, to complain and to deplore. To deplore something is an especially loaded word. It carries with it an extreme regret that leads to action. It means that we must complain.

Christians often are told that complaining is unbiblical. For example, Philippians 2:14 tells us to do things "without complaining or grumbling." But this is not the kind of complaint I am speaking of. The apostle Paul is referring to a spirit that complains about something God wants us to do in a grumbling sort of way.

Yet the complaint that comes from regret is a charge or accusation leveled at sin. It is the same term that is used when we take a complaint before a judge.

Guess what? I am complaining a lot to God these days.

I am complaining that 500 million orphans must go without families because no one cares. I am complaining that 200 million children are exploited for labor because the West is willing to buy the goods they produce. I am complaining that we must spend more on audits than on Christian work because some of our trusted workers are not disciplined and should not be trusted.

When such a complaint is leveled, then the next step is action to redress the complaint. Such action must be taken by us.

The church is God's tool to destroy the works of the devil. The structures of sin created by the enemy have bound up people in slavery, in oppression, in hunger and disease. Surely it is our responsibility to take action that redresses these problems.

Lamentations are the first step in making a change. Without them, anything we do is just a program or a change in procedure. With them, actions are undertaken on the basis of repentance and moral strength.

Lamentations are biblical and needed. What have you lamented lately?

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