

Emotional Well-being Sermon Series - Sermon 4

IT IS WELL WITH MY SOUL

Scripture text: Ps.88

Note to leaders:

Some of the experiences shared by members during this sermon series may contain sensitive information. Do take some time to emphasize the importance of respect and confidentiality in the group before you start each session.

We pray that your small group will be a safe place for members to share and receive support.

The recommended time allocation for your group meeting is:

If you meet weekly :

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of core questions (40 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of additional questions (30 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

If you meet fortnightly :

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 2 sessions' worth of core questions (60 mins)
- Optional - additional questions (10 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

Introduction:

The biblical understanding of well-being does not mean that everything is fine and dandy. There may be moments of suffering and challenges, and the Christian life is not free from all these. At such times, it is alright to express one's sadness, pain, disappointment and laments to God. Lament can be a part of a person's way of managing suffering and pain. How one does it is important such that it is part of the process of developing one's well-being in God. What does biblical lament look like? How can one do so constructively without swinging to the extreme? May this study guide help members to begin thinking and even work out a healthy practice of lamenting as part of their wholeness and well-being.

Core Questions:

(If your group meets fortnightly, combine Core Questions of two sessions and choose one Further Question from either session.)

1) How do you understand the nature of lament based on the sermon and from the Bible?

- What is the basis for lament in the life of a Christian?
- Is lament an indication of lack of faith?
- How is lament different from mere complaining?
- How can one express their suffering and pain before God?
- Recall a time when you encountered personal suffering and pain. How did you tell God about your thoughts and feelings? What did you request of Him?

Intention:

To help members understand the nature of lament and how it is a legitimate form of prayer amidst suffering and pain. Lament is an avenue where one connects with God and therefore they can approach Him with their struggles rather than feel helpless or resort to unhelpful behaviour or habits.

Suggestions for discussion:

Lament may not be an indication of a person's lack of faith in God but rather an expression of seeking God in the midst of personal suffering and pain. Refer to Dr. Soong's article on "*The Power and Beauty of Lament*" for some insights to the basis for lament in the life of a Christian.

The sermon explained that laments acknowledge that:

- Suffering is real
- God is real
- God really listens to our groans.

Laments are not a lack of faith. On the contrary, lament is a form of prayer, an expression of faith.

Lament is a form of prayer directed to God. Lament recognises that God is listening, even when He remains silent.

"Lament arises out of suffering; it is when folks are struggling with the reality of their lives because they can't pay their bills, can't put healthy food on the table, the heater is about to get shut off, their mom has lost her job, or their grandmother is sick with cancer. Those are very real scenarios, and the Bible actually responds to real life. So lament is the proper response to suffering. We jump so quickly to everything's going to be okay, everything is awesome, everything is going to be fine. We forget that the Bible actually allows us, and in fact encourages and may be even commands us, to stay in those places of suffering, to speak the honest truth, 'Lord, this is how I'm feeling, God, this is the pain I'm experiencing,' instead of jumping so quickly to 'God is good, God loves me, God's going to take care of me.' So I think lament is the honesty that sometimes we lack in the church."

"The reality is our lives are not always filled with triumph and victory; our lives are oftentimes filled with suffering and pain, and lament in the Bible allows that, it legitimates our suffering. It says it's okay to feel that pain, it's okay to even articulate that out loud. It's okay to articulate that in your corporate worship. In fact, it's something that God wants you to do."

- Soong-Chan Rah, *The Power and Beauty of Lament*.

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2016/july/power-and-beauty-of-lament.html>

A mere complaint, on the other hand, is simply grumbling about a problem without any serious appeal to God, without sincerely addressing it to God.

Lamenting can be deep and there can be many practical ways of expressing one's lament.

- e.g. sighing, groaning, writing (journaling), crying out against God, etc.
- Invite members to share their own experiences with the group. Not everyone has to follow the same practice or expression because the expression is very personal. Some may prefer one way over the other. While this is an exploration of different ways to lament it is also an opportunity for the members to find out what works well for them.
- Note to leaders: People in pain may not know how to express their thoughts and feelings effectively in order to find relief. Thus, they may turn to unhelpful means of behaviour and habits which may in turn result in addictions. Invite members to provide some examples of such unhelpful behaviour, habits and addictions. (e.g. resorting to different forms of family abuse, drinking, over-eating, gambling, excessive use of phone, online shopping, pornography, etc.)
- If they need help in this area, please refer them to BRMC WECARE or the Care Centre for assistance.

2) Read Psalm 88 together.

Then, consider the following:

- **Share with your small group: how did the reading make you feel? What were some reasons you felt that way? Have you had any past experiences that you would describe in a similar language as Psalm 88?**
- **Where is God in Psalm 88? Where is God in our experience of suffering?**

Suggestions for discussion:

- a) For many, reading Psalm 88 will make them feel sad.
 - Some may feel sad because their own experiences are reflected in the language of the psalm. Encourage them to take up this psalm as their own prayer of lament before God.
 - Others may feel sad not because of their own personal experiences, but because they have observed such suffering in their families or friends. This is a mark of empathy, and should be commended. Encourage them that, through this psalm, God may be moving them to pray for and care for these persons.
 - Some members may focus more on their thoughts rather than on their feelings which were stirred through the reading. Acknowledge those thoughts but gently redirect the conversation to their feelings. Encourage the group that the Psalms should not only be understood and interpreted in our minds, but also be engaged and expressed with our feelings.
- b) In Psalm 88, God is the one to whom vexed questions and soul-weary requests are directed. God does not speak or respond in the Psalm, but He is not absent. If He were absent, the psalmist would not have prayed and the Psalm would not be included in the Bible. Rather, it is understood that God is simply listening to the lament being expressed.

In our experience of suffering, some common concerns / questions include:

- Why me? What did I do to deserve this? (Refer to sermon #2 as reference).
- Where can I find relief? How long must I bear with this suffering and pain? When will it end?
- Who can I turn to for help?
- Where is God when it hurts so much?

These are questions we see described in Psalm 88. Again, note that God does not give an intellectual or theoretical answer to these questions.

The sermon noted that Jesus shares in our human suffering, as seen in:

- In the incident of Jesus weeping at Lazarus' tomb (John chapter 11),
- In Jesus' cry of lament from Psalm 22 while He was suffering on the Cross (Mark 15.34),
- In Jesus' wounds which remain as scars even on His resurrected body.

God's response to human suffering is not a theoretical answer. Rather, His response is to take up our human suffering, to join in our laments, and to be present in our wounds. And then, through Jesus' death and resurrection, He redeems our suffering and triumphs over all our pains.

Note to leader: You do not have to answer or address every question on "why suffering?"; rather this is a time to simply hear one another's view and focus on the hope for well-being expressed in the assigned text. Where needed, members may be referred to BRMC WE CARE.

"...it gave me permission to grieve and to suffer and to articulate...and to feel unresolved... Those are the kind of things that I think Lamentations and laments throughout all of Scripture allow us to articulate. You begin to see the Scriptures not through the lens of the heroic individual who is going to go out and save the world and conquer the world, but through the suffering and the broken. Lament gives you the ability to articulate your personal story – how someone in your family is struggling with cancer or with Alzheimer's. Your story, your parents' story, and your loved one's story, is in the Bible and the Bible gives honor to that part of the story."

- Soong-Chan Rah, *The Power and Beauty of Lament*.

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Further Questions:

(Optional question for discussion if time permits. Do allocate adequate time for prayer and fellowship.)

- 3) **How can the community (small group / Church) respond to or support someone who is lamenting so that it helps the person's well-being in a constructive way?**
 - **Have you helped someone or been helped by someone as you lamented? What was it like?**
 - **How would your small group help, or even lament with, those who are lamenting? What would that look like?**

Intention:

As the process of lament is very personal and can vary from person to person in different forms and ways, it may be helpful for members to know how to (and how not to) respond when a family member or friend is lamenting. As God is the one who is ever present to listen to our suffering and pain, so we can also be present and provide a listening ear to them.

Suggestions for discussion:

Invite members to provide practical suggestions as to how they can be present and listen to someone who is lamenting. These include:

- Being present and available for the person
- Keeping in regular contact
- Be willing to lend a listening ear and be slow to speak (see side-box for more tips)
- Where/when possible, enjoy activities together such as exercise, leisure walks, sport, dance, art and craft, games, etc.
- Not putting all the attention on their suffering, but relating to them as a person
- Affirming them, remind them that no matter what, they are made in the image of God and so they are precious and priceless.

Invite members to share their personal experiences where they have helped someone or were helped by others.

- Invite them to share what they found helpful or not helpful.

Being a GOOD Listener

“My dear brothers [and sisters], take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...”

Jas 1:19

1. Listen with your Ears for their
 - Content of conversation
 - Choice of words / language used
 - Tone of voice
2. Listen with your Eyes for their
 - Physical appearance, e.g. tiredness, loss of weight, unkempt hair, dressing, etc.
 - Body language
 - Incongruence in speech & expression
3. Listen with your Heart for their
 - Feelings and emotions
4. Listen with your Body
 - Acknowledge that you are listening with appropriate nods, eye contact and facial expressions
 - Hold hands or hug where appropriate
5. Listen with your Mind
 - Put other thoughts or concerns aside so that you can give your full attention to the person.
 - Refrain from thinking of providing quick-fix solutions or answers unless asked
6. Listen with your Mouth
 - Use verbal gestures / acknowledgement
 - Ask open-ended questions that would allow the person to say more so that you may understand him / her better

Suggestions for Prayer:

- 1) Pray for your small group.
 - Pray for God to use your small group to be a community that supports others who may be lamenting over a very trying season in their life.
 - Ask God for grace, strength and even gifts that will enable your small group to minister and bring well-being to those whom God will bring into your paths.

- 2) Pray for BRMC to be a community that gives care while we await God's cure.
 - One metaphor for the Church is that of a hospital, a place and a community which receives those who are broken and wounded, who are seeking health and well-being. Pray for BRMC to recognize this God-given role in this nation and to rise up and be equipped so as to be able to minister to these people.
 - Ask God how you and your small group can be part of this mission to give care. Discuss and share with one another. What actions will you commit to, as you join His work of redemption and restoration?