

The Way of Lament: Should Christians Curse?

Psalm 28

7/7/2019

PD Mayfield

If you have your Bibles, turn to Psalm 28. We're continuing our summer series In the Psalms. And this morning, I'm going to be introducing a new type of Psalm, a Psalm of lament. So, if you have already been crying some this morning, maybe you'll have some more things to cry about. Or maybe I'm going to be crying. We'll see what happens.

But laments are incredibly valuable parts of scripture, and they're all over the Psalms. Laments are expressions of grief and sorrow. But they are anchored in the hope of salvation that comes from the Lord our God. Laments give us the emotional vocabulary to process the discomfort of life. And they give us the relational compass to navigate these experiences with that hope. So, read with me. Follow along as I read Psalm 28 of David.

To you, O Lord, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit. Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary. Do not drag me off with the wicked, with the workers of evil who speak peace with their neighbors while evil is in their hearts. Give to them according to their work and according to the evil of their deeds; give to them according to the work of their hands; render them their due reward. Because they do not regard the works of the Lord or the work of his hands, he will tear them down and build them up no more.

Blessed be the Lord! For he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy. The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him. The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed. Oh, save your people and bless your heritage! Be their shepherd and carry them forever.
[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray again.

Father, add to the reading of your word. Bless the teacher. Help us as a people to lament what is righteous and what is good because it is lacking in ourselves and in the world. And may we cry out to you, the one who is just and merciful. In your name we pray. Amen.

So, it has been said that Mark Twain had a habit of swearing. You can get the sense that he actually enjoyed it. In one memoir that was written about him, it was said that Mark Twain said this, "When you're mad, count four. When you're very mad, swear. But most of us don't wait to count four. At least, I don't." His habit of swearing was upsetting to his wife who tried her best to cure him of it. And there's a story that one day while he was shaving, Mark Twain cut himself and he began to recite all of his vocabulary. And when he was finished, his wife was rather hoping to shock him by repeating all the words that he said. And instead of shocking him, Mark Twain just kind of chuckled and laughed which, of course, made her all the more irate. But he calmly responded, "You have the words, dear. But you don't know the tune."

So, from the get-go, you may be wondering what my title is all about. My sermon is not going to refer to what Mark Twain maybe took pleasure in. It's not about the impolite or the crass or vulgar slang that we might use. And you know the words; the words that you don't want your mom to hear you say, right? We know what they are.

But what I'm referring to with asking this question, should Christians curse, it's imbedded in an understanding of, what is a Psalm of lament? And so, it's referring to what's often behind the words that we don't want our mom to hear. And if you even look at the words themselves, cursing or swearing or older generations might even say speaking oaths, what's happening? Out of our anger, in invoke supernatural power to inflict harm or punishment upon someone or something.

For example, in Shakespeare, Mercutio says this in *Romeo and Juliet*, "I am hurt. Plague on both of your houses." Even James and John, two of Jesus's disciples, there was a time when Jesus was in Samaria and he was not received in the village, and James and John plead with the Lord. They say, "Lord, do you want us to tell fires to come down from heaven and consume them?" Of course, Jesus kind of looked at them and rebuked them. He might have sent a meme today just kind of blinking like, what? Where is this coming from? Where do you get such things?

Perhaps it's like when you were teased by a classmate and you might say these things to their face, but you certainly think them in your mind, and you might say them under your breath. You might say, yeah, well I hope you get a big fat pimple tomorrow. Or, I hope you forget about that test that we have on Friday and you can an F. We're cursing people or things because we're wishing upon them justice in exchange for the injustice that we experience, or we perceive that is done to us.

So, when we look at the Psalms of lament, the Bible actually gives us direction on how to properly curse. What do I mean by that? These Psalms of lament are the words and the tune to make sense of a world that often is just broken, cracked, falling apart. Psalms of lament give voice to the pain and to the sorrow we feel due to our relationships and due to our circumstances. So, as we look through Psalm 28 as an introduction, I'm going to briefly talk about four things. The Psalms give us permission to lament. The Psalms model for us how to lament. Psalms of lament guide us to curse in God-honoring ways. And number four, Psalms of lament anchor our despair to the hope of the Lord. So, that's where we're going to go as we look at Psalm 28 and other examples from the Psalms.

First, the Psalms give us permission to lament. Now, there are individual Psalms of lament such as today's passage which is of David. Individual laments are the experiences of that person that has a context. It has circumstances and events associated with it. But they're appropriated for the corporate life of the people of God. Remember, the Psalms are the hymn book for the people of God.

Corporate laments, on the other hand, focus on the experience of the whole people of God. They may not necessarily be happening to every individual person in the same ways, but they are impacting the collective community. Next week, Pastor John will be preaching a corporate lament. The week after that, we're going to spend two more weeks on lament by looking at it from an internal perspective of our suffering. So, today and next week, it's looking at the external suffering that we experience due to various things. Sometimes, we call them imprecatory Psalms. Imprecations are calling out the curses. And we'll speak to that in a few moments. But this week and next week will be the laments of imprecatory Psalms.

As lament makes up the majority of the Psalms, either the whole Psalm or portions of them, there are a couple important details to consider. So, in this section, I'm borrowing pretty heavily upon Dillard and Longman's *Introduction to the Old Testament*.

First, a Psalm of lament is very easily recognized by its mood. It's the minor key. It's the depths of woe. It's the despair that we feel in our circumstances or in our emotions. It has themes of pain, despair, and exhaustion. The emotional weight hangs low with the many questions that we ask of ourselves, that the psalmist asks of himself, or even the questions that are being asked of the Lord. For example, in Psalm 13:1-2, the psalmist says, "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"

Dillard and Longman go on to describe these laments as songs of disorientation, of abandonment, deep distress, pain and suffering. In such Psalms, the writer experiences troubles in his life. And these

troubles can come from various sources. And I'm going to mention three. The first source of these troubles are external threats from an enemy. Now, the enemy is never specified, names are never given, and likely, the enemies are the nations that are against the Davidic king. So, often against David or his line with specificity. But they also can be more general, and they are the enemies of the nation of Israel, those nations who are against the Lord God and His people.

For example, Psalm 57 when David is fleeing from the cave, he writes, "My soul is in the midst of lions. I lie down amid fiery beasts. The children of man whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp words." And then again in verse 6, "They set a net for my steps. My soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into it themselves." There, David's enemy is not just somebody that's external to the nation of Israel, but also from within the people of God.

Another source of trouble that the psalmist is lamenting are the internal troubles that are within us. This source arises out of emotional anguish associated with persecutions, doubts, or painful circumstances. An example of this comes from Psalm 22:6-7, "But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me. They make mouths at me, making faces at me. They wag their heads." And in verses 14-15, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death." It's this deep emotional anguish. They're meant to be read; they're meant to be sung with the same tone of where those words match.

A third source of these struggles are spiritual struggles that we have with God. The psalmist may perceive abandonment by God in the midst of his trials, in the midst of his experiences. And again, we can look at Psalm 22 as an example. Verses 1-2, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest." Psalm 102:9-10: "For I eat ashes like bread and mingle tears with my drink, because of your indignation and anger; for you have taken me up and thrown me down." The psalmist is wrestling with God.

Now, there might be discipline that the psalmist is actually experiencing, and that wrestling is out of confession and repentance. But it also can just be the perception of the abandonment. And he's wrestling with that pain and anguish of what seems to be silence. Who's ever felt that? Regardless of the source of trouble, Psalms of lament, they model to us vulnerability. They model to us honesty before God by expressing deep pain and tragic loss to Him. We go to the Lord with this pain. The Psalms are giving us permission to lament.

Number two, the Psalms model for us how to lament. Let's look at some common features that are found in laments. An individual Psalm will likely not have all of these elements, nor they won't necessarily be in this exact sequence, but they will have many of these elements. There will be an invocation, an opening cry to the deity, to the divine power to hear and listen. And in that invocation comes a plea for help. There are complaints that are made to the Lord. These could be listed. They could be cried out. They could be a sense of assurance that the psalmist is actually blameless. But it also could be a complaint that is founded in the need for confession of sin.

We see a key part of lament, what's called imprecations, or the cursing of enemies. We'll get to this in a few moments. But another two elements that could happen in Psalms of lament, expressions of confidence that indeed the Lord heard the prayer, the assurances of His presence, the assurances of His faithfulness. And then likewise might be an overflowing response, a hymn, a noise, a praise to the Lord, a blessing to Him and a thanksgiving prayer.

Our Psalm today, Psalm 28, ends on that high note of resting in the salvation of the Lord. But there are other Psalms that end with the despair and it goes silent wrestling with the reality of where life's misery often leaves us wondering, is God really there?

So, let's quickly walk through Psalm 28. Our intention today is to get more of an introduction than to go deep in this Psalm. John's going to go into more depth into a particular Psalm. But Psalm 28 is a great example that we can walk through to see some of these elements.

First, look at verse 1. We see the invocation, "To you, O Lord, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit." He's crying out to not just the powers that be, not to the universe that's cold and stale, but to the living God, the Lord, his rock. Verse 2 flows very naturally into his plea for help. "Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy," he's crying out for mercy, "when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands." It's not just swaying in the air from here to there. It's not excitement. It's not enthusiasm. It's that anguish. It's the longing. It's the grasping for the Lord. And his hands are toward the most holy sanctuary, the holy of holies, the place that the Lord God almighty dwells, the only source, the only place that can calm his help.

Verse 3 is the complaint that he brings forward. It comes out as a command, if you will. He's telling the Lord, don't do this to me, "Do not drag me off with the wicked, with the workers of evil who speak peace with their neighbors while evil is in their hearts." Now, the Bible and particularly the Psalms, the wicked, the righteous, we could go much more in depth on what that means. But here, in parallel, we get a sense of who the wicked are. They're the mischief makers, the doers of evil, the troublemakers.

The wicked then takes on a sense of those who are going against God's law, those who are making mischief, bringing about not the flourishing of another person, but the destruction of another person. And we see what they do, "who speak peace with their neighbors." If a person speaks peace, it gives a sense of flattery in public. But with evil in their hearts, there is a sense of deceit and the backstabbing. The NIV translates it, "to speak cordially, but to harbor malice." We've experienced this maybe, and maybe we've done it. We smile very nicely on the surface where we've sought to stab them in the back. The promise of peace gives a sense of safety and security for your wellbeing which allows your guard to be let down. Trust is established. And then evil that is in their hearts reveals their true motives. That such promise of peace will be used in their favor and against you.

Verse 4, we see the imprecatory nature of this Psalm, the curses, "Give to them according to their work and according to the evil of their deeds; give to them according to the work of their hands; render them their due reward." Understanding the group of people and the types of actions that are listed here will help us understand our own posture toward imprecatory cursing toward others. You see, when we're anchored to the hope of the gospel and the way the Psalms of lament model for us how to lament, we have our hearts aligned in a proper way of how to curse in the God-honoring ways.

We see how we don't long for their destruction, but we hate them because we hate what they're doing. We hate what they're doing against the God who has made them and you and who is marring and scarring and tearing down the image that we have of the God who has made us. We long for God's justice to bring about the repentance, or if not, that He would restrain the success of their deeds. So, these curses we see in the Psalms, we see them in the New Testament, particularly in the book of Acts or in 2 Timothy 2:14 when Paul speaks about the coppersmith, for he has done great evil to the work of the gospel. May he have his just reward.

The Psalms of lament, they guide us to curse in God-honoring ways. Now, this is a bold statement to be sure. And people disagree on whether Christians should do this, hence my question. People that I respect greatly, although he's not a skilled theologian, he's an excellent writer, C. S. Lewis doesn't think this is very good. It's not actually God honoring. It's not a reflection of something that can be noble or something that can be honorable to the Lord, but it actually reveals sin and hatred of the heart. I disagree with him here. Others have said, yes, this is exactly what we can do. The Lord is giving us the vocabulary on how to do it.

If I pray such curses, we have to really wrestle with, does this mean I hate them? Some might say that a moral religion or a moral person would not speak this way or wish these things upon others. Some might say, if the gospel of Jesus is of grace and mercy and love, then how can we pray these things? How

can we ask the Lord to give judgement and recompense? Should we not ask for mercy? Absolutely. The Psalm is teaching us what to do with our anger, what to do with our sorrow and pain. Lament allows us to process these emotions. It allows us to express them appropriately.

When Paul in Ephesians says, “Be angry, and do not sin,” he’s quoting the Psalms. Anger is a verb. Anger is an expression. It is to be experienced because it’s the nature of a miserable world. But how do we steward it in a way that is honoring to God? That becomes key.

So, we come before the Lord seeking His justice. So, when we call down these curses, this is what we have to be cautioned against. This is what we can’t claim. One, we’re not invoking God because we have power over God and we actually have the power for Him to do this, but we certainly must not claim that we take on the role of justice. We can wrongly appropriate that it is our duty to destroy our enemies in the name of the Lord. People have done this through the centuries. That is a wrong application of imprecatory Psalms. We don’t give out litany of complaints and curses to the Lord to stir us up to then go out and be the executor of such justice. The Lord will repay evil. The Lord is just. The Lord is righteous. The Lord is judge. He says, “Vengeance is mine.”

Psalms of lament guide us to curse others in God-honoring ways. Think about history. Think about people. Think about communities who have experienced collective oppression, anti-Semitism, racism, African Americans dealing with sadness and anger of their oppressors. And despite the oppression, I don’t know of any other example in the history of the world when large quantities of the oppressed take on the religion of the oppressors. Only a God of judgement, a God of righteousness, a God of holiness, a God of love and mercy can implant that kind of faith.

But lament becomes the words and the music of our soul that we put on our lips, we sing out of our hearts because it’s how we have to steward our emotions because if we are bottling it and suppressing it, it’s going to leak somewhere, and it’s going to be angry, and you will see it come to fruition in sin. If it’s unanchored by the grace of the gospel, you will muster yourself up into a frenzy and you will become the executor of such justice, justice of your own making for your own satisfaction whether it’s yours or some sort of mob.

So, the Psalms of lament guide us in a way to steward our fears, our anxieties, and we cast them to the Lord. We call upon His judgement. We call upon His righteousness. And we join with, as our Lord teaches us to pray, thy kingdom come, thy will be done. When we’re asking the Lord to usher in His kingdom, we’re asking Him to usher in His judgement making righteous decisions, righteous actions upon those who have spurned Him and who have sinned against others.

So, I don’t agree with C. S. Lewis, although I do often. I have my own little maxim that if I have thought of something, most likely, C. S. Lewis has written about it already, and it’s shorter and it’s better. But here, I don’t agree with C. S. Lewis. One commentator said this, “To find ourselves offended by this vigorous prayer,” these prayers of curses, “is not a measure of our refined sensitivity, but of our less than mature conscience. It is as right to pray for the overthrow of the wicked as it is to pray for the blessing of the church. It demands greater holiness if we are to do the former without sin.” And we can only do that because we also recognize in the timing of the Lord, He delivers time and time again. And ultimately, He has poured out His wrath and His justice upon Jesus Christ. All of the wickedness of the world is poured out on Christ on the cross. He drinks the dregs to the very bottom until He says, “It is finished.” He says, “Vengeance is mine.”

Lastly, Psalms of lament anchor our despair to the hope of the Lord. Just like a lighthouse, a beacon’s light, the glow directs our focus. So, as that, we focus upon the Lord in the midst of our darkness. And that makes all the difference between running aground or steering clear of safety. If we focus upon the despairing circumstances in our lives, if we ferment with hatred, we may fall headlong into our own destruction becoming what we actually hate, doing the injustices that we are actually protesting against. But if we wait upon the Lord as we focus on Him, the Lord will be our comfort, He will be our guide as He leads us through this despair with renewed joy of His deliverance.

So, we read, and we sing Psalms of lament. Brothers and sisters, cultivate a life of personal devotion where you're reading God's word, where you're prayerfully taking into account your concerns and your complaints, your protests to the Lord. Take them to Him. Use these Psalms as your prayers. May they be your cry from your heart, and may they also be the answer from the Lord that you're seeking. In addition to your own devotional life, have trusted companions that you seek encouragement and comfort from others in the body of Christ.

It's not always beneficial to air out the deepest pains of our heart. We are encouraged and instructed to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. And we weep with lament. It may not be our experience, but we can sit with a brother and sister and lament with them. Be a place of safety for the other so that they may, without shame and with complete abandonment, be able to let go of that which is disturbing their peace, tempting them to anger, tempting them to bring about their own solutions.

In this, it's also complex in our emotions and our psychology. The other encouragement to this would be your own reflection. Psalm 139:23-24, David, after immediately saying, "Don't I hate those who hate you? Am I not righteous in abhorring those that you abhor?" Those verses are put in perspective with the next stanza, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way of everlasting!" Romans 12, "Rather than being conformed to the ways of the world, be transformed by the renewing of your mind, being shaped by the love that is Christ and extending that love to others."

We don't cast curses up to God because we actually want Him to execute His judgement. We trust that it will come, but we ask for His compassion. Psalms of lament actually let us work through that so we can come on the other side through hope of His deliverance that we might experience His mercy and that those who are causing us great harm might likewise be radically changed and saved and delivered from their own wickedness, that they, too, might come to embrace the Lord God who knows them and loves them and makes them new.

So, what do you do if one of your team members presents a group project and takes personal credit for a specific contribution that you make? The Psalms give you a framework to lament and properly align your hearts to the Lord's grace and truth. What if your classmate spreads a vicious rumor that brings about teasing from some or perhaps silent shunning from others? Let the Psalms of lament be a refuge. May the Lord be your strength. What if a close friend or a family member has recently died, and you lost your job within the last three months, and now you just went for a wellness visit and the doctor's calling for additional tests? What then? You go to the Lord. He is your rock. What do you do if a loved one betrays your trust? Well, you call down curses. Just kidding.

No, we are not to repay evil for evil. Rather, we are to trust the Lord. We pray for His kingdom come. We pray for our repentance and theirs. We ask His help to forgive, and we rest in His judgement as He rules righteously. We've looked at the sources of such troubles. We've looked at the features of a Psalm of lament. We've looked at out it models how we are to curse, even, as we look to the Lord who brings righteous judgement. These laments resonate with our discomfort and the pains of our life. The Psalms give the people of God permission to be honest, permission to recognize that we're afraid, to recognize that we are anxious, to recognize that we don't understand why the world is not working the way it's supposed to.

So, we are full of lament because the world is unjust. We lament because the Lord is our strength. We lament because He is our rock, He is our refuge, we have our stability, our security in Him. We lament because we are rooted in His truth, His grace, His mercy, His justice, not ours. And we lament because we can be anchored to His hope that we are given the encouragement by the power of the Holy Spirit we can endure as we lean out in the watching world in love.

When you're experiencing pain and sorrows, brothers and sisters, listen to the Lord. Cry out to Him. Cry out to Him that He wouldn't do to you what you want Him to do to them. But then, fall at the feet

of His mercy crying out for compassion, crying out for salvation, yours and theirs. We do this with also great hope because we know that the story is finished, but not yet.

As all of the world's wickedness is poured out on Christ, we are rooted and anchored to Him to took it on our behalf. We can go to Him casting all our fears and anxieties. He went to the cross despising the shame, taking abuse, taking falsehood and slander, taking the sins of the world on Himself so that we might be free, so that we might be forgiven, so that we might have hope in Him. Let us pray.

Father God, we rejoice and give thanks for your mercy and abundance. Help us to walk in this way of lament. Help us to not be fake in our hope. Help us to not be false in the silver linings but help us to be right smack in the middle of where you have us. In our daily needs, our weekly stresses, our constant fears, may we go to you with lament receiving your comfort and your refuge. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.