



OUR SONG IN THE NIGHT



A SERMON SERIES FOR THE SEASON OF LENT

LAMENT & HOPE

by Michael Van Patter

You know those moments; the ones when sorrow, fear, grief, or anger runs deep, welling up to an unsustainable level of tension. Moments when the fog of sadness is so deep it seems it will never lift. Moments where the guilt of past or present failures feel too heavy to possibly carry for another day. Moments when the troubles of our wide world seem so pervasive and dark that they overwhelm. If you do not know these moments, you will. Suffering is common to all humanity. What are we to do? How are we to deal with these unavoidable “dark nights of the soul”? And, perhaps an even more difficult question: in a culture of Christianity that tries to tell us that the mark of a faithful life is a happy life, how do we walk with God through the pain?

While this question is vastly complex and volumes have been written exploring it, a good place to start is to ask another question. How do we feel about lament? Dan Allender, in his essay “The Hidden Hope of Lament”, suggests that Christians tend to fear the somber, seeing it as a downward spiral toward despair and doubt (seen as emotions to avoid in many circles). He says, “the assumption is that trust precludes struggle; faith erases doubt; hope removes despair. Therefore, lament is unnecessary if one trusts, loves, and obeys God. Sadly, we have misunderstood the great value of public and private lament. To lament—that is to cry out to God with our doubts, our incriminations of him and others, to bring a complaint against him—is the context for surrender.



Surrender—the turning of our heart over to him, asking for mercy, and receiving his terms for restoration—is impossible without battle. To put it simply, it is inconceivable to surrender to God unless there is a prior, declared war against him...a lament is the battle cry against God that paradoxically voices a heart of desire and ironic faith in his goodness.”

When we voice these “battle cries”, we are in good company. Nearly one third of all the Psalms are songs of lament. When we begin to look closely at these, some of the phrases are astounding:



How comfortable are we with this sort of language? I confess that, though I feel relief in acknowledging the reality of these feelings, the intensity is intimidating. And yet, it is modeled for us abundantly in Scripture.

During this season of lent, we will explore together the practice of lament, and push into those seemingly opposing feelings of complaint and desire, questioning and faith. We’re calling the sermon series “My Song in the Night”, a phrase which is taken from Psalm 77; an image of the Psalmist seeking God even in times of darkness. As we immerse ourselves in the language of lament over this season, we do so with eyes fixed on the Man of Sorrows, the one who bore all of the guilt, sorrow, suffering, and death so that we might have free and welcome access to the Father. I pray that we would grow in both boldness of lament and depth of hope, for the sake of God’s glory and His kingdom.



I REMEMBERED YOU, GOD,
AND I GROANED. (PSALM 77)

HOW LONG, LORD?
WILL YOU FORGET ME FOREVER?
HOW LONG WILL YOU HIDE YOUR FACE FROM
ME? (PSALM 13)

HEAR MY PRAYER, LORD,
LISTEN TO MY CRY FOR HELP;
DO NOT BE DEAF TO MY WEeping. (PSALM 39)

“HOW IS FAITH TO ENDURE, O GOD, WHEN YOU ALLOW ALL THIS SCRAPING AND TEARING ON US? YOU HAVE ALLOWED RIVERS OF BLOOD TO FLOW, MOUNTAINS OF SUFFERING TO PILE UP, SOBS TO BECOME HUMANITY’S SONG--ALL WITHOUT LIFTING A FINGER THAT WE COULD SEE. YOU HAVE ALLOWED BONDS OF LOVE BEYOND NUMBER TO BE PAINFULLY SNAPPED. IF YOU HAVE NOT ABANDONED US, EXPLAIN YOURSELF. WE STRAIN TO HEAR. BUT INSTEAD OF HEARING AN ANSWER WE CATCH SIGHT OF GOD HIMSELF SCRAPED AND TORN. THROUGH OUR TEARS WE SEE THE TEARS OF GOD.”

- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*

WHAT IS LENT?

The practice of Lent may be unfamiliar to many of us. It's a season that has not commonly been made part of evangelical church life. Lent has traditionally been a time of fasting and spiritual preparation for the forty days, excluding Sundays, leading up to Easter Sunday. It begins with Ash Wednesday (named because of the ashes traditionally used in the service to symbolize grief and repentance), and ends on the Saturday before Easter. Sundays are excluded from the forty days because they express the resurrection as a present reality (they are sometimes called "mini-Easters").

We might see Lent as a time of emptying and filling our lives. Just as we do "spring cleaning" to make room in our homes for the important things, lent is a time to consider our lives and our priorities.

Lent is traditionally a season of repentance. There are two parts to repentance. First, it is an acknowledgment of sin as it shows up in our lives through idolatry, wrong thinking and attitudes, affections and aspirations, and behaviors and actions. Second, it's a time for us to turn to Christ for forgiveness and strength to change and grow to be more like Him. It is a sober reflection upon our condition, which leads us to faith and fresh trust in and leaning on the finished work of Christ.

The very movements of worship express the emptying and filling preparations of Lent. We become empty of sin through God's forgiveness, and are motivated by gratitude to live lives of obedience and service.

We should be careful not to approach Lent from a legalistic posture. We take this forty day journey with Christ, but we do so remembering that He has already completed the journey, and we are completely loved and accepted by God because of it.



cover illustration by Stephen Crotts