

Teaching A Counselee To Lament

By Wendy Wood



David and the Psalmists knew how to express their feelings to God. We can see in the Psalms the joyous exclamation of praise and worship as the authors rejoiced in the greatness and goodness of God. But we also see the reality of sadness and grief expressed in the Psalms of lament. The Psalmists show us how to take our feelings to God, whether those feelings are positive or negative. Our culture wants us to believe that negative emotions are abnormal and can be “fixed” with medication or we should distract ourselves with a pleasurable experience. But God's word tells us differently. The bible is full of real people with real emotions. We see Tamar in shame and grief over a horrible evil that has been done to her. We see Elijah discouraged and self-pitying sitting under a tree just after an amazing display of God’s power and presence. David is sad and

overwhelmed as he is pursued by Saul and his men looking to kill him. Asaph, a worship leader, expresses bewilderment and confusion as it seems evildoers are prospering and he is not. God invites us and shows us how to express our genuine feelings to Him and how to seek help and hope in times of sadness and grief.

Our counselees will benefit from learning that negative emotions are a normal part of life in a sin-cursed world. Jesus expressed His troubled emotions in the Garden of Gethsemane. If Jesus, who never sinned, experiences a distressed and troubled soul in this world, we too should expect times of difficulty and negative emotions. Being sad is not wrong or sin. Being grieved is a normal response to this world. Our counselees need to see that God created us in His image, to experience the full range of emotions, and that God has purpose in our emotional responses.

God wants our emotions to draw us closer to Him. God desires that we take our emotions to Him, to be honest and bold in our expressions of sadness and hurt. God wants our dependence on Him when we are experiencing these emotions.

The Biblical lament does not stop at the expression of emotion. We are not to just sit in the depressed state of negative feelings, but are called to remember who God is, to recount His faithfulness through scripture and our lives, and to commit to trust God and His promises in the moment and for the future. The Psalms were songs for public worship. The Psalmists expected that worshippers would feel scared, sad, overwhelmed and confused at times. David and the people of God sang about their sadness and grief and expressed hope in God corporately as a way of worship. Our counselees need to lament and come boldly to the throne of God to find hope and mercy (Hebrews 4:14-16).

I frequently use Psalm 13 and Psalm 73 as examples to teach counselees how to lament. In following the pattern set out in scripture, a counselee can honestly express their hurt feelings and be met by a sympathetic High Priest in Christ who also has experienced those emotions (Hebrews 4:14-16). They can experience the comfort and mercy from God that He offers to His children (2 Corinthians 1:3-8). And they can declare the faithful works of God (Psalm 136) and declare His attributes and character (Psalm 103:6-14), and rest in the promises yet to come (1 Peter 5:10). A lament helps us remember that in this world, we will be sorrowful yet always rejoicing. The sorrow is real. We really do suffer. But the rejoicing is real, too, because God is God.

Psalm 13 is short and an easy pattern to follow. I suggest you start here with your counselee.

Psalm 13

How Long, O Lord?

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

1. How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

2 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?

Verses one and two express the emotion. The difficulty has been going on for a long time. "How long?" asks David. It feels like an eternity to David. "How

long will you hide your face from me?” expresses that it feels like God is distant and not answering David’s prayers. David clearly states he is sorrowful. He is upset that people around him are cruel and mistreating him. David doesn’t sugarcoat the hardship he is going through. But the key is that David goes to God. He’s not complaining to a friend. He’s not gathering support for his pity-party. David goes to God and therefore demonstrates that He trusts God as the Sovereign One over the situation David finds himself in. David goes to God because he knows that God loves him and has the power to act.

3 Consider and answer me, O Lord my God;

light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

4 lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”

lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

David then makes a request as a plea to God. David needs help! “Consider and answer me” is a request for help that again demonstrates that he trusts God has the answers! “Light up my eyes” is David asking for God to show him Truth and lead him through his difficult circumstances. David is trusting God’s justice in righting the wrongs of his enemies and trusts that God will vindicate him. David shows faith in God through these requests. He takes his feelings to the only One who can help him.

5 But I have trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

6 I will sing to the Lord,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

And then David worships! David talks to himself. He stops listening to his emotions and instead speaks to himself of God's faithfulness and love. He counsels his heart with Truth. What overflows from his heart is a beautiful statement of his faith and trust in God. His circumstances haven't changed yet. His enemies still surround him. He still has sorrow and difficulty, but David worships because God is always worthy of worship.

Assign a lament to your counselee. Have them pattern a personal lament in this six verse format. The first two verses should express the situation and feelings they are experiencing. The second two verses should be a cry for help. The last two verses are a declaration of truth and worship. In this world we will have trouble, but God has not left us alone or without means to address every emotion we experience.