

From May 10th to June 21st, I am preaching through a sermon series called “How Long, O Lord?” about suffering, loss, lament, and trust. There are many ways you can respond to suffering and loss, but the way that the Bible gives us is lament. Lament is “a prayer in pain that leads to trust,” as Mark Vroegop says in his book “Dark clouds, deep mercy.” It consists of four movements: turn to God, voice your complaint, ask boldly, and choose to trust. In these movements, we resist the temptation to stuff down our emotions, on the one hand, or to be overcome by them, on the other hand. We do not simply resign ourselves to what has happened to us as our fate, but we ask boldly for what it is we need. And in the end, we choose to trust in God, that whether or not He gives us what we ask for, he is still good, and still loves us, and can be trusted.

This morning we are going to talk about a particular kind of suffering and loss that leads to lament, and that is death. We are going to read from John 11, the account of Jesus with two of his friends, Mary and Martha, as they lament the death of their brother Lazarus.

John 11:1-45 - Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, "**This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.**" ⁵ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ **Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.** ⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light." ¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to **tell them**, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "**Lazarus is dead,** ¹⁵ **and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.** But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die **with him.**" ¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ "**Lord,**" Martha said to Jesus, "**if you had**

been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever **you ask.** ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;* ²⁶ *and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." ²⁸ And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister **Mary aside.** "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. ³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his **feet and said,** "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ *Jesus wept.* ³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, **came to the tomb.** It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people **standing here,** that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

Let's look at the four movement of lament in this passage and what we learn about facing death.

1) **Turn to God**

Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick. He stays two more days (we'll get back to that) and by the time he arrives, Lazarus is dead. Both of Lazarus' sisters come out to

Jesus and say the same thing: “lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Before we get into that complaint, I need to highlight once again that losing a loved one to death, especially a tragic or untimely death, has caused many people to turn away from God. Many atheists can trace their falling away to a loss that caused them to either hate God or to conclude that no loving God could ever allow such a tragedy to happen.

But more than that, I would argue that the fear of death has caused many people not to turn to God but to turn to things that distract them from the reality of death. Entertainment, addictive substances, or any number of other things that keep us from facing our mortality, instead of facing our fears head on with God. Even our phones can serve to distract us from silence, from reflection, from dealing with our hurt, our pain, and our fears. As David Foster Wallace wrote, *“Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that’s dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least feeling directly or with our full attention.”* If you have not truly dealt with the hurt from a loss you have experienced, a loss you are going to be experiencing soon, or even from your own mortality, can I encourage you to courageously turn to God, and then to go on to movement #2:

2) **Voice your complaint**

In John 11, both sisters come to Jesus and say **“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”** It is a familiar complaint, no matter what words you use. Lord, you were powerful enough to save my brother, my son, my spouse, my mother from death. Lord, if you had chosen to, they would still be here. But you let them die. Why? Both Mary and Martha show us what we have been learning all along, that **God does not ask us to stoically accept what comes our way as His will, but to pour out our sadness, our hurt, our anger, and our questions to Him.** If we don’t understand, we tell him that. If we are doubting His goodness and His love, we let Him know. If we are sad, or angry, we give voice to it.

In fact, just in case you are still doubting, look at Jesus again in v. 32-35:

³² *When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* ³³ *When*

Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ *Jesus wept.*

Jesus knows He is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, and yet when he sees his friend weeping over the death of her brother, he weeps along with her. "Deeply moved in spirit and troubled" means that he was outraged. It is because death is an enemy. It was never meant to be like this.

1 Corinthians 15:26 - The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

We are not meant to give easy, pat answers in response to death. We aren't meant to see it as "just another part of life." Death is an enemy. It was not meant to be this way. It robs us of the ones we love, and is so often painful and cruel. Jesus wept when he saw his friend weeping over the loss of his brother. And Jesus weeps with you at your loss. It is wrong. It wasn't meant to be this way.

One of my favorite books on grief that I read in preparation for this series was Nicolas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son*, written as he processed the death of his son Eric. In one chapter, he writes: "I skimmed some books on grief. They offered ways of not looking death and pain in the face, ways of turning away from death out there to one's own inner "grief process" and then, on that, laying the heavy hand of rationality. I will not have it so. I will not look away. I will indeed remind myself that there's more to life than pain. I will accept joy. But I will not look away from Eric dead. It demonic awfulness I will not ignore. I owe that – to him and to God."

And as he said in another place, "I lament all that might have been, and now will never be."

C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Problem of Pain*, a classic on suffering, as a 42 year-old. That book contains the classic line that I quoted this past Sunday in my sermon: "*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*" It's a great line that reminds us of God can use suffering to wake us up to our impending death, to our need to get right with Him and to live our lives in wisdom. Twenty years later, though, at age 62, Lewis' wife died, and the next year he published another book on suffering, a collection of his journals in response to his wife's death called *A Grief Observed*. *A Grief Observed* does not provide the reader with neat and tidy

answers and logical explanations the way *The Problem of Pain* did. Consider some of these quotes:

“Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.”

“What do people mean when they say, ‘I am not afraid of God because I know He is good?’ Have they never even been to a dentist?”

As even C.S. Lewis found, life becomes a lot less neat and tidy when faced with death, that a loss that profound causes all kinds of questions, doubts, fears, and emotions. And lament teaches us not to stuff those down but to cry out to God.

Bernard of Clairvaux – *“O my God, deep calls unto deep. The deep of my profound misery calls to the deep of Your infinite mercy.”*

Jesus’ tears at the tomb of Lazarus show us that it is right to pour out our heart, our complaints, our fears, our anger, our sadness, our disappointment, and our questions to God. And they also show us that when those who we love are facing death, or the death of a loved one, that we should do as Jesus did and as Paul says in **Romans 12:15** - Rejoice **with those** who rejoice; **mourn with those** who **mourn**. You don’t need to give answers to people in pain; just cry with them.

As Joe Bayly, a man who had three sons die, wrote in his book *The view from a Hearse*:

“I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God’s dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly. He said things I knew were true. I wished he would go away. And he finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn’t talk. He didn’t ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour, or more. He listened when I said something. He answered briefly. He prayed simply. And he left. I hated to see him go.”

Mary and Martha show us that in the face of death, it is right to turn to God and voice your complaint.

3) **Ask boldly**

²² *But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."* ²³ *Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."* ²⁴ *Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

As I considered what we would ask for when faced with death, I think there are two requests that come to mind. **The first is that death would not be the end.** Death is such a cruel ending, and there is something in us that won't accept that, that believes that love should be eternal.

I believe that we long for all of this to be true because our hearts recognize that this is what we were created for.

***Ecclesiastes 3:11** - He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

Think about it. When you come to a funeral, when a loved one dies, do you find yourself at peace with that being the end? Or does something inside you rage against it? Do you know deep down that death is wrong, that it was never meant to be this way? Do you long for life beyond the grave, for reunion, for death to not have the final word? That longing in your heart is not an accident. It is there because he has set eternity in your hearts. You are longing for God, for Jesus, for the glory of the gospel, for life as God intended it to be.

As Jesus said to Martha, **John 11:25-26** - *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

And as Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 15:54-57** - *When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Death is not the end! Love is eternal.

The second request I believe is that there would be meaning in this tragedy. That the death would not be meaningless.

In the case of Lazarus, ⁴ *When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."*

¹⁴ *So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.*

The tragedy of atheism, of a world without a God, is that everything is ultimately objectively meaningless. You can try to create whatever meaning you want, but in the end, death is the ultimate tragedy, because it is the final end of life. And our hearts protest against that. We want, we need for there to be meaning, even in tragedy. And in the gospel, there is.

Romans 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

4) Choose to trust

The final movement is to choose to trust in God despite our doubts, fears, anger, and sadness. **Marked by "yet" or "but."**

²² *But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."*

In the end, we choose to trust, to believe that God loves us and is good and is always working for good. It is to declare, I will trust you whether you heal or whether you allow my loved one to die. I will trust you whether you heal me or allow me to die. I will trust that death is not the end. I will trust that as long as I have you, I may not understand everything, but I will be okay.

Go back again to the beginning of this story.

³ *So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."* ⁴ *When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."* ⁵ *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.* ⁶ *Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.*

He loved them, and so he stayed two more days, and Lazarus dies. He loves them so much that he stays where he is and lets him die. What does that tell you? Clearly Jesus' love is different than ours. Clearly he operates on a timetable different than

ours, with plans and purposes that are not always in line with ours. Clearly there are times when God allows tragedies to happen for a greater purpose.

Could it be that he has a reason you can not understand?

Can you humble yourself enough to accept this? Can you believe that if God is big enough to create everything, then he is big enough to have a reason for allowing your suffering that you can not understand? Can that help you to trust, knowing that God is perfect in His love, justice, and sovereignty, sees the end from the beginning, and knows what He is doing, even when we can't comprehend it?

Isaiah 55:8-9 For **my thoughts are not your thoughts**, neither **are your** ways **my** ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Elisabeth Elliot, who lost two husbands amidst many other inexplicable troubles, learned to trust God no matter what, and put it this way:

God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.

In the end, Jesus' delay brought more glory to God and increased their faith. Trust that God will do the same in your experience.

But is this just a blind "choose to trust"? How can you trust that He loves you and is good, even when confronted with death? Look at the rest of the passage:

John 11:46-53 - *But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.* ⁴⁷ *Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs.* ⁴⁸ *If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."* ⁴⁹ *Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all!"* ⁵⁰ ***You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.*** ⁵¹ *He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation,* ⁵² *and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.* ⁵³ *So from that day on they plotted to take his life.*

You are not the only one who has dealt with death. God allowed His own Son to die and unjust death in our place, so that for those who believe in Jesus, death will not be the end, but they will live forever.

*Hebrews 2:14-15 - Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their **fear of death**.*

Our God is a suffering God, a God who even experienced death, for us.

As Wolterstorff wrote: “Put your hand into my wounds,” said the risen Jesus to Thomas, “and you will know who I am.” The wounds of Christ are his identity. They tell us who he is. He did not lose them. They went down into the grave with him and they came up with him – visible, tangible, palpable. Rising did not remove them. He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds... In my living, my son’s dying will not be the last word. But as I rise up, I bear the wounds of his death. My rising does not remove them. They mark me. If you want to know who I am, put your hand in.”

And so we end with these words:

*1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 - Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to **grieve** like the rest of men, who have no **hope**. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*

Amen.