

Submit

Psalm 143:11-12

Series: Lament and Response (Psalm 143, late Spring 2020)

Preaching Date: May 24, 2020

Worship: Your Great Name

Key Sentence: Lament allows us to submit to God as we wait for his deliverance.

Outline:

A. We trust that for his name's sake

 B. He will act in righteousness toward us

 B'. His steadfast love will act on our behalf

A'. We submit as his servants

Psalm 143:11-12 For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble! ¹²In your steadfast love vanquish my enemies and destroy all those hostile to my soul, for I am your servant.

Submit

Psalm 143:11-12

The Heidelberg Catechism, one of the early documents of the Protestant church, opens with this question: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but that I belong, in body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” When Todd Billings was diagnosed with cancer in 2012 he prefaced his public sharing of that truth with this question. He then embarked on an unwilling journey to see how that truth and the realities of cancer would intersect in one real life. His book is called *Rejoicing in Lament*, subtitled “wrestling with incurable cancer & life in Christ.”

Billings was 39 when diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a cancer of plasma cells, produced in bone marrow, that displaces healthy red blood cells and replaces white blood cells. The cancer compromises the immune system and causes bone pain and damage. It increases risk of infection and damages other organs. Treatments include radiation, chemotherapy and stem cell transplants. It is very, very unusual to develop multiple myeloma before the age of forty. Billings, who with his wife Rachel had a one year old son and a three year old daughter, describes the days after receiving the diagnosis “I had been in a fog ever since. How was I to face each day when my future, which had seemed wide open, had suddenly narrowed? My ‘world’ seemed to be caving in on itself with fog in each direction I turned, so that no light could shine in.”

Have you ever felt your world caving in on itself? It doesn’t take a diagnosis of cancer to reach this place. We’ve seen in Psalm 143 that we all have some kind of pain, and for many listening right now this pain is a deep, enduring, dark fog. It comes in many guises, from many directions: sickness; death of loved ones; broken relationships; financial struggles and needs; doubt and discouragement about our own faith; personal sin; brokenness; loneliness and isolation. The infertile couple carries a load very different than the parents of a prodigal yet both feel isolated in their grief. The physical pain of cancer and treatment is not the same as the emotional agony of abandonment, abuse or betrayal, yet both lead to some of the same questions about God.

Billings was in a unique position to wrestle with those questions. As Research Professor of Reformed Theology at Western Theological Seminary, Billings had already addressed some of these wrestlings from Scripture, and now, with this diagnosis, he began to engage them in light of his own suffering. Today, as we finish our time in Psalm 143 we’ll see how Todd Billings’ thoughts on lament speak directly to our processing of our own pain.

We've looked at key responses that lead to trust: remembering God and his work, thirsting for him, seeking his face, fleeing to him and following him as he leads even through valleys. Today we'll see a last response which, to choose one word, I've called 'submit.' I could have used the word trust, which is the end point where our prayers in pain can lead. But I chose submit, not in the narrow sense of mere obedience, but in the larger sense of letting God be God even when we don't understand him. Lament allows us to submit to God as we wait for his deliverance. Let's read the Psalm one last time.

Psalm 143:1-12 *Hear my prayer, O LORD; listen to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness and in your righteousness, answer me! ²Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you. ³For the enemy has pursued my soul; he has crushed my life to the ground; he has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. ⁴Therefore my spirit is weak within me; my heart within me is desolate. ⁵I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands. ⁶I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land. Selah ⁷Answer me quickly, O LORD! My spirit fails! Hide not your face from me, lest I be like those who go down to the pit. ⁸Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for I put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul. ⁹Deliver me from my enemies, O LORD! I flee to you for cover. ¹⁰Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground! ¹¹For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble! ¹²In your steadfast love vanquish my enemies and destroy all those hostile to my soul, for I am your servant.*

Lament is the prayer prayed in the midst of pain that leads us to trust in God. Mark Vroegop's elements of lament are turning to God, bringing our complaints, asking boldly for his response, and finally voicing our trust. You would expect these last two verses to be all about trust, and they are wrapped in trust, but they also include more bold asking. The structure of verses 11-12 shows this. Verse 11 starts with a backhanded statement of trust "For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life!" The Psalmist, David, is trusting in God to act in accordance with his character, for his own name's sake in preserving David's life. In the middle two phrases he gives two examples. First "in your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!" God has revealed himself and shown himself to be righteous. Therefore, David can count on him to bring the righteous rescue that he, David, needs. Second example, verse 12. "In your steadfast love vanquish my enemies and destroy all those hostile to my soul." God's hesed is revealed in his acts of deliverance. And finally the last phrase of verse 12 is a return to trust "for I am your servant." All this forms a structure which students of literature call chiasmus, trust/ask/ask/trust or ABB'A'.

So let's look at them phrase by phrase. "For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life!" This is a bold request, preserve my life, but it doesn't refer directly to a character quality of God. Rather it trusts in God's own motivations. "For your name's sake" is a phrase that appears often in Scripture. It's a call for him to act in ways consistent with his character, reflecting well on his glory and reputation. Let me give an example. In Isaiah 48:9 God says "For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off." God is saying "so that my patience and steadfast love will be seen to be praiseworthy, I'm won't give you what you deserve." Instead he refines them in the furnace of affliction – sometimes that is a reason for our suffering – and in verse 11: "For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another."

When the Psalmists use this phrase, especially in lament, it's a way of trusting in God's character. It's an expression of trust. Psalm 23:3 "He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." We can trust God to lead in the path of righteousness even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Psalm 25:11 "For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great." We ask for God's forgiveness not because we deserve it, but as an expression of trust in his consistency with his own character. Psalm 79:9 "Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!" Psalm 106:8 "Yet he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make known his mighty power." Psalm 109:21 "But you, O God my Lord, deal on my behalf for your name's sake; because your steadfast love is good, deliver me!" God's reputation is linked to his good hesed. The one who owes me nothing gives me everything.

Trusting that God will honor his own name, David first relies on his righteousness. "In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!" We've seen the word righteousness before. Verse 1 "Hear my prayer, O LORD; listen to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness and in your righteousness, answer me!" God's righteousness is the quality by which he always does what is right, what is just and true. David is praying that God, for his name's sake, will act in that righteousness on his behalf, rescuing him from the trouble that oppresses him. This word trouble or distress is a good summary of why we lament. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament says it is "the strong emotional response one experiences when pressed externally by enemies or internally by wrong decisions or passions." The root word has to do with being in a tight place, a narrow place, the same word picture Billings uses for his cancer: "How was I to face each day when my future, which had seemed wide open, had suddenly narrowed?" In the English Standard Version it's translated trouble, distress, affliction, adversity, anguish and tribulation.

That's what David is experiencing, and what we experience in our places of pain. Are we willing to admit before God that these circumstances hurt and that we need his help and rescue? Or are we going to continue to push away our pain and try to tough it out? We need to be those who cry out to God in our distress.

But, you will say to me, "I've cried out to God and nothing happens. Nothing gets better. These feelings, these circumstances don't diminish." How do we think about this? How do we deal with this? Todd Billings addresses these concerns deeply because they were very real to him. He began chemotherapy within a few days of his diagnosis, and if the chemo was able to knock back enough of the cancer he would be able to have stem cell treatment. But he was also told that at best even that treatment would only put his cancer into deep remission, that it could never be fully cured. He was told that even with the most modern treatments the average life expectancy for those with this cancer was only, by some estimates, ten years. If left untreated it was a matter of months.

Billings says "I found myself thinking about these numbers when playing with Neti, my beautiful three-year-old daughter adopted from Ethiopia. Would I see her into middle school? If I listen to the 50-percent-for-ten-years estimate, then that means I have a 50 percent chance to see her live to be thirteen. What would be my "chances" to see her graduate from high school? And what does "chance" have to do with it, anyway? Why, God, oh why, would you allow this for little Neti and her younger brother, Nathaniel? Rachel and I desired and prayed for children. Both came as incredible gifts, answers to prayer. Why would you take away their dad during their childhoods?"

Billings turned to lament. He says "Scripture does not say God owes us a long life. But paradoxically, this does not mean that we accept suffering and death with a stoic fatalism. Instead, God's people lament." He relates lament, as Mark Vroegop does, and as I'm trying to do, directly to trust. He discussed this in 2015 in a public conversation at Western Seminary. I'll let him say it: "Even in the moments where it seems, where you're saying with the Psalmist 'God why have you hidden your face from me?' like in Psalm 13 it's really based on God's promise in the sense that God promises his people to shine his face upon them and that that would be a blessing and a source of life. And so when that doesn't happen it's out of trust that the Psalmist says 'God, why is this not happening?' It's like throwing the promise of God back at him, and that is an act of trust and of hope." The other cancer survivor in that discussion, poet Christian Wiman says much the same thing by quoting the earlier poet George Herbert: "Ah, my dear angry Lord, Since thou dost love, yet strike; Cast down, yet help afford; Sure I will do the like. I will complain, yet praise; I will bewail, approve; And all my sour-sweet days I will lament and love."

So there's a tension in the Psalms of lament that we need to grab hold of. They are complaints, they are bold requests. But they are made in the context of submission to and trust in God and they hold in tension his absolute goodness and our experience of trauma and suffering. We submit by holding these in tension. Our present circumstances do not trump God's revealed character.

With this foundation Billings gives an honest answer to what is called the problem of evil, or theodicy. Why is there such evil and tragedy? Why do bad things happen even to believers? Why do people get cancer? Why do children suffer? "In my view the biblical "answer" to the speculative problem of evil is this (drum roll, please): we don't have an answer. It's not that the Bible hasn't addressed the question so that we as humans are left with a shoulder-shrugging 'I don't know.' The Bible has addressed the question, and God's response . . . is that humans don't have an answer to the problem of evil. . . It should remain an open question, one we continue to ask in prayer and in our lives."

Billings walks through the book of Job, and shows that Job laments: turning to God, justifiably complaining, asking why. Job's friends think you can always work backwards from suffering to some sin. Job denies this and ultimately so does God. "Sometimes," Billings says, "suffering or calamity is the result of our actions. But Job's was not. And much suffering in the world is not unlike Job's suffering, or my suffering with cancer. "But," Billings says "as one continues the narrative of Job. . . our theodicy question, which demands to know 'why,' is left unanswered." It may be that God is so much more than we are that an answer would be like explaining color to a blind man or the theory of relativity to a newborn. Billings says "If God is truly God and we are not, it is a loving and gracious act of God to tell us that our creaturely wisdom is limited; we can and should lament and respond to evil and suffering in our midst. But only God has a God's-eye perspective that answers why it has been allowed."

Instead we are called to submit to the inexpressible but promised purpose of God, to trust that his purpose is good, and to call him to act in ways that show us his revealed character. Verse 12: "In your steadfast love vanquish my enemies and destroy all those hostile to my soul, for I am your servant." In your hesed, act. As we saw earlier, the best definition of hesed I've seen is "when the one who owes you nothing gives you everything. Billings says "both God's character and God's characteristic actions are defined by this word hesed." "The psalms of lament come before the Lord in expectation of God's hesed, and when God's lovingkindness does not appear to be evident, the psalms of lament complain to God on the grounds of his own covenant promise." "A conviction that God acts as the Lord who has bound himself in covenant love is at the theological center of the book of Psalms."

This is an attitude of trust. “In your steadfast love vanquish my enemies and destroy all those hostile to my soul.” We may be shocked by this request. It doesn’t sound like an act of steadfast love. But remember, David was king and he had real enemies, both nations and individuals. Furthermore, he was king by way of God’s steadfast love. God owed him nothing but gave him everything. So, to ask God on the basis of that steadfast love to sustain the kingdom by vanquishing the enemies who threatened it is not unreasonable. Then he prays about the destruction of those who would destroy his soul. We talked about this earlier. We have enemies, the world, the flesh, the devil. These enemies would love to destroy us. But God in his steadfast love has promised us rescue. To ask him to do it is reasonable. Do you see how this fits with what Billings is saying? We trust in a God of steadfast love and call on him when the world is not the way it ought to be. But we do not give up on God’s steadfast love when things do not go the way we think they should. We recognize that God has not given us the full answer to why evil things happen and we choose to keep lamenting and showing compassion even when we don’t understand.

In other words, we submit. We trust by submitting to God. The last phrase of the Psalm says “for I am your servant.” David was king, but he saw himself as a servant and was seen by God as a servant. God says of David “By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines, and from the hand of all their enemies.” He uses this phrase of David over twenty times. He uses it of Job, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Caleb, and, of course, of Jesus. Matthew 12:18 quotes Isaiah 42:1 “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” Jesus himself says that the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and he teaches his self-image of servanthood to all his disciples. “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.

At the heart of servanthood is submission. It’s obedience to the will and wishes of another. In one of his most profound parables, that should not leave us unchanged, Jesus says “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? ⁸Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? ⁹Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” That’s submission

In this matter of our pain, we cry out to God for rescue but we submit to his will. “Not my will but yours be done.” There is no greater example than Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, who prayed boldly “take this cup from me,” but who then said “not my will but yours be done.” He teaches us to pray, every time we wash our hands, “thy will be done.” This is submission. Billings says “‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done’ is a prayer of relinquishment of our own way—a prayerful alignment of the human will to God’s own will.”

You’ve probably figured out that Todd Billings has, so far, survived his cancer. He went through five rounds of chemotherapy and was prepared for the stem cell transplant. What happens is they harvest stem cells from the patient, filtered to remove all cancerous cells. The patient is subjected to massive doses of chemotherapy, what amounts to poison, which kills his or her bone marrow, and all or almost all of the cancer cells in their body. But this is essentially a death sentence. The body cannot survive without a constant growth of new blood cells in the bone marrow. So the stem cells that had been harvested are now re-infused into the blood. They engraft themselves into the bone marrow and restart the blood cell making machinery, without cancer. During this time your immune system is completely shut down or slowly rebuilding, so you have to be quarantined from all sources of infection.

Todd Billings received stem cell treatment in March of 2013 and was in quarantine for more than two months. His engraftment was successful, but the aftermath of this killing dose of chemotherapy was intense. “For months after the transplant, my fatigue was so powerful that my body was deeply exhausted for most of the day. Everyday tasks, particularly interpersonal interactions, were painful: they seemed to require energy that I didn’t have.” During this time he was told that it was working, that the stem cells were engrafting, but he says “To my own surprise, much of my deepest grieving came after this good news. I recall lying on my bed in the cancer lodge, crying aloud, when the thought came to mind: my life would never be the same—I would receive low-dose chemo for as long as my remissions last and frequent cancer tests “until” it returns. When it returns, I will need more intensive treatment. I feared for my children, that they would lose their father midcourse in their childhood. The good news about my transplant didn’t take this fear away.”

It was apparently at this point that he began to see the strong chemo that killed his bone marrow and the engrafting as a metaphor. This metaphor brought together his thinking about trust and submission. Also about the promise of the New Testament that our lives will be like Christ’s, including suffering, and about lament. I’ll let him read you a paragraph from the book as we close.

“All of us need strong medicine. We don’t just need a vitamin. We don’t just need a bandage to cover a flesh wound. We need strong medicine. We need death and new life in order to be healed, to have God’s created goodness restored, and to find reconciliation in our loving communion with God and neighbor. When we face suffering and then lament to God, even blaming and accusing God, asking for the deliverance that he alone can provide, we start to look to the great physician for the strong medicine that we need. Thus even when we feel abandoned in, this is from Luther, spiritual trials, sorrow, grief and anguish of heart, God can use these as medicines with which God purges away sin. For if we stay in ourselves we stay in our sickness. No engraftment, no life. But in looking to Christ, who is your life, Colossians 3, we find our help. In abiding in Christ and feeding on Christ we find a medicine deep and strong enough that we will never go into relapse.”

So what have we said, today and in this series? Lament is the prayer we pray in the midst of pain that leads us to trust in God. We do not retreat from God but we turn to God and cry out, voicing our complaints rather than suppressing them. We ask why God doesn’t seem to be acting according to his character, and how long this will go on. And we boldly ask him to act according to what he has revealed himself to be while knowingly living in the tension between what’s happening in our lives and what that revelation tells us. We let God be God and submit ourselves to him in trust, knowing that the strong medicine of his steadfast love will ultimately bring healing and all will be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.