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# Lament: A Faithful Response to Tragedy

## DAVE BAST

There is one thing to be said for 2020: No one who lives through this year will ever forget it. Global pandemic; economic shutdown; urban unrest. Someone said recently that 2020 is like living through 1918, 1929, and 1968 all in the same year! So, how can we as Christians respond to the circumstances in which we find ourselves in this year of our Lord 2020? Well, that is what we want to talk about in this new series of *Groundwork* programs, beginning right now.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

## DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, today we are beginning a new series of *Groundwork* programs. The reason is, we are taking a slightly different approach. We dig into scripture...that is the purpose of *Groundwork*...in order to lay the foundation for our lives. So, we believe in scripture. It is the Word of God in human words, and it provides a firm foundation. You recall Jesus saying in the parable that the person who hears these words of mine and does them is like one who builds their house upon a rock. So, that goes without saying; but it is also true that we need to explore scripture in light of what is going on right now, in our lives and in the world.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; so, this series...we are going to dig into scripture in every program...but it is a little more topical, as we want to reflect on the things that we have been thinking about and dealing with through the pandemic, through the racial unrest that has gripped particularly the United States in spring and early summer of 2020. So, we are going to do four programs. This one we are going to talk about something we have all been experiencing: lament—lamenting the times that we are in—lamenting the loss of life—lamenting the violence. In our second program, we are going to think about providence. Where is God? Where was God in this pandemic? So, we will think about providence. In the third program, we have all been dealing with worship by remote—worship online, even sometimes the Lord’s Supper online; so, we will want to think about worship and what we have learned about worship and fellowship through our not being able to do it in the usual ways; and then finally in the fourth program, particularly reflecting on some of the social inequities that were revealed by COVID-19, as well as by all the racial unrest. We will think about the theme of justice. Dave Bast:

We want to begin with the question of how should we respond, or how *do* we respond to everything that has been going on around us; and as you said, Scott, we want to start with the biblical category of lament; and we also do this recognizing that we are probably all in different circumstances. One of the really weird things about what we find ourselves in, especially with the pandemic, is that everybody in the world literally is facing the same issue...they are facing the same crisis...it is the same disease...and it has now spread pretty much to every country on earth; but our experiences of it are so different. Some people have lost loved ones. Some people have been terribly ill. Other people don’t know anyone who has been sick...

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

## **DAVE BAST**

And it seems unreal to them. Some people have been ruined economically or they have lost their job or their business; others are kind of cruising through, you know; they've got plenty. So, that is one of the weird things.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

But the idea that, yes, we are all in this together. As of this day of our recording, I saw on the news this morning that over 400,000 people have died worldwide; and that number may actually be higher because a lot of poorer countries are really being devastated by this, and they maybe don't have the infrastructure to report their numbers; but we have all sort of been in it together, whether we have been deeply affected personally or not, we have all endured the lockdowns and the isolation and the loneliness. We have all seen events...graduations, weddings, anniversary trips...

## **DAVE BAST**

Funerals...even funerals.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Funerals. We haven't been able to hold anything normally; and so, we think about, you know, that biblical injunction to rejoice with those who rejoice, but in this particular time, the second part of that verse...we weep with those who weep, and we lament. We have talked about this before on *Groundwork*, Dave, but lament is a very important category of prayer in scripture. One third of the psalms...almost fifty out of the one hundred fifty psalms in the Bible...are psalms of lament.

## **DAVE BAST**

And here is one of the best; it is one of the shortest, Psalm 13, but it is a great example of biblical lament: How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? <sup>2</sup>How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? <sup>3</sup>Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death <sup>4</sup>and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

Maybe I will stop right there. We will get to the conclusion of this psalm a little bit later in the program; but how long? There is a question all of us have been asking, isn't it?

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; interestingly, in this particular psalm of lament the question isn't *why*...why am I suffering, or why does my enemy seem to be gaining the upper hand? It is just how long are you going to let this go on?

You know, April and May were very long months for a lot of us who were locked down. How long, Lord; how long are you going to let this go on?

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Can't there be a breakthrough; you know, can't you do something? But again, this is an honest form of prayer. The biblical writers did not shy away from complaining to God. We often do. We think it is rude, or we don't think it is our place. We don't think it is a very pious thing to do, to kind of yell at God, and you know, lament? We shy away; the Bible didn't.

## **DAVE BAST**

The key thing to recognize, I think, about lament, is that it is an expression of grief...it is an expression of suffering. It is something that we are all called to do, no matter how we are feeling. We may be feeling quite jaunty, you know. This is perhaps bad news for the praise band at church, but we are supposed to be lamenting regularly as part of our worship, because that is what the psalms do; and the reason is not just to express feelings, whether we are having them or not, or even if we empathize with those who are suffering,

although that is part of it; but lament is, as Neal Plantinga...a person whom we quote often here on *Groundwork*...as he has pointed out, it is an act of faith—it is an acknowledgment that this isn't right—this isn't the way things are supposed to be.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

It is what Walter Brueggeman calls the Friday voice of faith...sort of thinking about the Good Friday voice. There is the Easter voice, and that is important; but the Friday voice of faith is important as well; and indeed, Dave, the complaints and the laments we find in all the lament psalms do not stem from weak faith, they stem from robust faith, a faith that believes that the world is supposed to be different than it is. God is supposed to try to help make it different than it is; and so, when God...in the view of the psalmist...when God seems to go off duty and terrible things start happening, we are right to lament, in the sense of feeling bad, shedding empathetic tears for people who have lost loved ones to COVID, or empathetic tears for black brothers and sisters who have witnessed these terrible police killings in 2020 and for many years. So, it is right to be empathetic, but it is also right to lament in the sense of saying to God: Now, when are *you* going to do something about this, because we are hurting down here. Have you noticed? Have you noticed? So, it is a very, very important part of faith; and we want to explore that a little bit more, and we are going to dig into some more scripture to do just that, and we will do that in a moment.

*Segment 2*

### **DAVE BAST**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I am Scott Hoezee.

### **DAVE BAST**

And Scott, you were just saying that lament calls upon God to sort of recognize what is going on here, and to do something about it. It is a call to action, it is not just an expression of sorrow or feelings of frustration; but it calls God to act, and that doesn't mean that we don't have to act. We are going to talk a lot about that, especially in the last program in this series, about things that we need to do to respond; but it recognizes that unless God begins...

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

### **DAVE BAST**

And unless God is at work, our actions finally won't amount to much...they won't bring real change. So, I think one of my favorite psalms of lament is Psalm 74\*, where the psalmist says: Hey, God; do you know what's going on here? And he says: Take your hand from the fold of your robes, or if we would put it in today's terms: God, take your hands out of your pockets and do something about this.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes.

### **DAVE BAST**

But, there is another psalm that expresses, I think, the sort of conflicting feelings or emotions that come over us in a time of crisis or a time of disruption such as we have been having, and that is Psalm 55.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And it goes like this: Listen to my prayer, O God; do not ignore my plea; <sup>2</sup>hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught... <sup>4</sup>My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me. <sup>5</sup>Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. <sup>6</sup>I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of

a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. <sup>7</sup>I would flee away and stay in the desert; <sup>8</sup>I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm.”

So there, Dave, Psalm 55...echoes of what a lot of people have been feeling; trapped by this virus; trapped in racist systems of oppression and of fear. You know, just these earnest pleas. I think a lot of us have had some occasion or another to pray a little like this, or we have wanted to. Again, sometimes we shy away, but: Hear me, O God...you know, please, listen to my plea.

**DAVE BAST**

Or, I wish I had the wings of a dove; I would love to just escape.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

You know, there is a thing going on right now, as I have read, of people trying to acquire RVs somehow, or rent them or buy them so they can just get out of here. They want to bug out...they want to get away; and that is an ancient feeling...that is age old. The psalmist felt the same thing. Or you wish you could just go to sleep and wake up and find out it was all just a bad dream.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

A bad dream, yes.

**DAVE BAST**

So, the question is, though, what can we do with these feelings and fears that we have? There are some wonderful things in these psalms that suggest a way we can go; and specifically, the end of Psalm 55. We skipped...it is a fairly long psalm, so we have skipped a lot of stuff in the middle, but here is the way it closes:

<sup>22</sup>Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken... <sup>23b</sup>But as for me, I trust in you.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And there you have it, Dave. I mean, you said just a minute ago, we have these feelings; sometimes we want to deny it because we think we are not supposed to be upset with God or angry with God, or that it is not our place to tell God what to do, for goodness' sake, right? So, we could deny and suppress our feelings, or we could be so overwhelmed by our anxieties that they define us, and we become very timid people. We become fearful people, which might mean we become reactionary people...

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Or we are not very pleasant to be around; or we can do what David did, and what the psalmists did, cast those cares on the Lord. So, it is a fairly famous verse: Cast your cares on the Lord. It sounds nice, but that means you have to admit you have the cares in the first place. You have to name them honestly, and then in prayer turn them over to God, which is what the lament psalms do.

**DAVE BAST**

You know, here is the thing about faith. It is sort of like a pilot's parachute, you know. The pilot straps the parachute on and gets in the plane, but hopes he doesn't have to use it or rely on it...

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

**DAVE BAST**

And our faith can be that way, too. The only time we really know that it is real is when we have to rely on it, because most of the time...let's be honest...we get by with our income, our home, our family, our friends, our jobs...you name it. We don't have too many pressing personal needs day in and day out, for most of us; but then something happens and many of those things are taken away or they suddenly become uncertain, and the question is: What do we have left? Do we have that faith...that trust...that is willing to say: Okay, Lord, I put my trust in you. I will cast my cares on you, knowing that you will not let me down.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

I will share my experience a little bit, and I am sure it probably resonates with you, and probably with a lot of our listeners, too. One of the things that was taken away for many of us, at least for now, starting in March and February and April of 2020 was the ability to predict the future, or to plan, right? I mean, I spent parts of every day for about two weeks removing things from my Google calendar until my entire calendar was blank. I had had an extremely busy start to the spring semester. My January and February were clogged with meetings and classes I was teaching, and then all of a sudden, they were all gone, and I realized I cannot plan anything. I cannot even plan anything for July...and I was thinking this in March, you know. Are we sure that a year from now we could hold the conference we just had to cancel; and for some of us, that is a little crazy-making, because all of our usual certainties are gone...

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And we cannot plan; and so, what do you do, then? Well, you could curdle into depression, I guess, and curl up into a little ball; or you could say to God: Lord, the things that made me confident before shouldn't have made me confident. My confidence should have been in you all along, not in my Google calendar...

**DAVE BAST**

Right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

So I cast that upon you. Help us...sustain us through this uncertainty.

**DAVE BAST**

Suddenly we are not in control, isn't that it?

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

We never were, but we *thought* we were.

**DAVE BAST**

That is the key word; we *thought* we were. We could manage our lives and we could take care of our own needs. When we are reminded that that is simply not true...and it never was true...it was all kind of an illusion...because many people learn that individually. Something terrible happens, or some life-changing event suddenly happens, and they are reminded: Yeah, no; I am not in control. I need to rely on the Lord. I need to cast my cares on him. But in this case what was unusual was that it happened to all of us at the same time; and so, we face squarely the question: Is my faith actual? Is it real? Do I really believe what I have said I believe? Here is a neat thing that you said, Scott...that verse is familiar, and it is: Cast your cares upon the Lord. One of the reasons it is familiar is because it is repeated by Peter in his first letter...

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

## DAVE BAST

And he alters the conclusion. The psalmist says...he kind of follows that up with a promise: God will not fail you. Peter follows it up with a reason: Cast your cares on the Lord for he cares for you. It is a reminder that God really does love us—he really does care for us.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

In our next episode in this series we are going to talk about providence and how close God is to us, even during time of pandemic and unrest and so forth. That is the foundation on which the psalms of lament are built. The foundational belief that God loves us, and he can take it when we yell at him; he can take it when we lament because he loves us; and he is going to come through, and we are going to talk about this in just a minute. He will come through; and so, even these psalms of lament, with one exception, they turn the corner to light; and we will think about that in a moment.

*Segment 3*

## DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and today we are talking about the idea of lament. We are into a new series that is addressing, really, the events of our time—of our year—this year 2020. We are going to try to take a biblical perspective on how to respond on what's been happening, and we have begun, Scott, with the idea of personal response. What should we be doing and feeling as followers of Jesus? The first thing we learn, especially from the Psalms, is we lament...we acknowledge the disruption, the things that have been happening that are just plain wrong and bad. We are honest about our feelings—our feelings with God. We ask him to do something about it, and we cast our cares upon him.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and we just said a minute ago, Dave, at the end of the previous segment of this program that the psalms of lament are built on the foundational idea that God loves us, and he can take it when we complain or when we lament; and that means, also though, that there is this belief...so, that is the irony. Some of the psalms of lament say: God, you are absent. You are gone. You are missing. And yet, they are saying that to God. So, they lament God's absence to God's face, right? That is a very, very typical posture of prayer for Jewish people and for the Israelites of old. That also means that the psalms of lament turn the corner at some point. We read Psalm 13...the first part of it in the first segment of this program. It is pretty dire psalm of lament: How long, O Lord? How long; will you ignore me forever? How long...how long...how long?

But this is how Psalm 13 ends:

<sup>5</sup>But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. <sup>6</sup>I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.

## DAVE BAST

Which is amazing because there is no indication that the psalmist's basic problem has been solved. He is saying this kind of confidence and trust...this expression of love in return for God's unfailing love...his *chesed*...we like to use that word on *Groundwork*. It is one of the wonderful, almost untranslatable Hebrew terms from the Old Testament...

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

## DAVE BAST

Covenant love, constant love, unfailing love, loving-kindness in the old version; and the psalmist sort of has his confidence in this restored, even though there is no reason to believe that God has delivered him yet. He is still in the soup.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

But he trusts. He says God has been good to me. We get that sometimes in the psalms of lament, too. So, sometimes psalms of lament say: But God has made promises. He doesn't seem to have been doing much about them lately, but I am going to trust he is going to come through. Some psalms of lament do seem to have been written after the fact: But then, O Lord, you came through. So, then they were written kind of in retrospect and we get the end of the story; and then, right, there is like Psalm 13 here where it is basically saying: Look, he's been good to me before...

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

So I am going to assume he is going to be good to me again, even though he hasn't felt very good lately, but I am going to trust that that is so; and I think that also is such a key piece of faith...a key posture of faith.

## **DAVE BAST**

You know, we have talked about these questions that the psalms raise, and that, of course, makes you think in biblical terms of the character of Job in the book of Job, a book that we have explored pretty thoroughly on *Groundwork*; we have had a whole series on it, and Job is the ultimate questioner: God, where are you? God, why? The curious thing about Job's experience and the message of the book of Job is many of these questions we have for God don't have answers. We are never going to know, at least in this life, we are never going to know; but by the end of Job it is as though he doesn't really feel the need for answers anymore.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Which is a good thing because Job doesn't get any. The first forty-one chapters of Job are clotted with questions, and then the last few chapters God takes Job on a cosmic tour...kind of takes him to the zoo...and shows all the splendors of creation, and at the end Job says: Well, I realize now I didn't even know how to ask the right questions, so forget it; never mind; I trust you, O Lord. So, we may or may not ever understand. A lot of people will ask: Why has this happened? Why was there this pandemic? Why is there such violence in our society...such racism enmeshed in our systems? Why, why, why? In this life, as you said, Dave, we may never know why this happened. There may be some good that will come out of it, some bits and pieces, some glimmers of things. Ten years from now we may look back and say: That was terrible. The loss of life was terrible, but some good came of it. So, we might, in a limited way, see that; or we might not, but that is where faith comes in to say: You know, I am still going to believe that God's got this thing. Again, we will talk about that in the next program on providence; but, I have got to believe that God's got this thing. This has derailed a lot of what we wanted to do, it is not derailing God's ultimate purpose.

## **DAVE BAST**

Maybe for the last word we could turn to the New Testament, to the Apostle Paul, in Romans 14, where he...he is talking about some issues in the life of the Church, and those are relevant to us, but maybe that is another program; but in the middle of that, he breaks out with this wonderful statement: <sup>8</sup>If we live, we live to the Lord (or we live *for* the Lord), if we die, we die to the Lord (or *for* the Lord). So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

As if to say: You know, we don't know how this is going to turn out. We don't even know whether we will be healthy next week or whether we will fall sick, and if we do, whether we will live or whether we will die; but that is always true. Our lives in this world are precarious, and we need to depend on God...we need to cast our cares on him...we need to put our trust in him; and recognize that, in life and in death, whichever, we belong to the Lord, and that is really all that we need.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We hope you will join us again next time as we dig into scripture to

better understand how God shows up and provides for us so that we can respond to hard questions like how long and where is God and why is God allowing this COVID-19 situation?

We encourage you to connect with us at our website, [groundworkonline.com](https://groundworkonline.com). There you can share what *Groundwork* means to you and make suggestions for future *Groundwork* programs.

**\*Correction:** The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as Psalm 72. The correct reference is Psalm 74:11.

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**<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/lament-a-faithful-response-to-tragedy>**

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