



Learning to Lament: A Prayer Practice for Exhausted Parents

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For most of my life, I believed strong faith meant keeping my emotions in check.

Then my husband and I spent 18 years walking with our four kids through serious mental illness. There were psychiatric hospitals, residential treatment, suicidality, and more emergencies than I can count. Our kids are adults now, and the challenges are still part of our lives.

I tried to pray through all of it the way I had been taught: stay calm, quote the right verse, and move on. It nearly broke me.

What rescued my prayer life was learning how to lament. I'm still learning, and honestly, I'm still not very good at it. But if you're exhausted and your prayers feel thin, I hope something here gives you permission to be honest with God.

What Is a Prayer of Lament?

A prayer of lament is telling God the truth about your pain. You name what hurts and ask the questions you're afraid to ask. You bring all of it to Him, before you've cleaned any of it up.

The Bible is full of these prayers. [Psalm 13](#) opens with, "*How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?*" (NIV) [Psalm 62](#) tells us to "*pour out your hearts to him.*" (NIV) Jesus wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus. In Gethsemane, He told His closest friends that His soul was overwhelmed with sorrow. On the cross, He prayed the opening line of Psalm 22, one of the psalms of lament.

Lamenting to God is how His people have always talked to Him in the dark. Most lament psalms don't stay in the dark, either. They move, sometimes over many verses, from pain toward trust.

Here is what took me years to understand: bringing my emotions to God takes faith. You only cry out to someone you believe can hear you, cares about your grief and wants to comfort you.

Why Does Lament Feel So Wrong to Christian Parents?

Many of us were taught, one way or another, that big emotions mean weak faith. I know I was.

In the church and family I grew up in, having emotions at all was treated as weakness. There was hardly a worse thing you could say about someone than, "She's so emotional." Staying cool and unmoved, like Mr. Spock, was the ultimate virtue.

So I minimized my feelings, ignored them, and shamed myself for having them. I believed that feeling distressed meant I didn't trust God enough.

Maybe you've heard your own version of this. *Faith over fear. Just give it to God. Why are you anxious if God is in control?*

Then you're lying awake, terrified you won't be able to keep your child alive. And those words land like a verdict: your faith isn't strong enough.

In much of modern American church culture, lament has come to look like a lack of faith. The Psalms show us something very different. God placed these raw, anguished prayers right in the middle of His Word so we would learn how to pray them.

What Happens When You Suppress Your Emotions in Prayer?

For years, my prayers followed the same pattern. I'd sit down to pray, and all the fear, grief, and exhaustion I had been holding would rise up.

Within seconds, I'd stop myself and start rattling off Bible verses. I really thought that was what a faithful person was supposed to do.

It didn't work. Stuffing my emotions down didn't make them go away. It harmed my faith, and eventually it started to make me physically sick. I came close to a breakdown because I had no understanding, no permission, and no safe place to bring what I was carrying.

And the whole time, God was waiting for me to bring it to Him.

I hear this same story from parents in our community over and over. Many of them started out on fire in their walk with the Lord. Years later, their faith has grown cold, and they are so weary.

Part of the reason is that they have never lamented the hardest, saddest, most despair-filled things in their lives. No one ever told them they could. No one taught them that was God's design.

What Changes When You Bring Your Feelings to God

For me, the change came slowly. But once it clicked, it transformed my life.

I learned from the Christian social workers on our team and from Kay Warren, who teaches so beautifully about emotions. As they taught our community, I was learning right alongside the other parents. Something in me was ready. I knew the old way wasn't right, though I couldn't explain why.

People used to tell me, "You have to feel your feelings." I had no idea what that meant. Over time, I have learned that feelings are not enemies to fight or commands to follow. They can be noticed, named, and brought honestly to God.

Brain research offers a helpful parallel. A [2007 UCLA brain-imaging study](#) found that when people put emotional reactions to negative images into words, their amygdala response was lower than in comparison conditions. Naming a feeling may not make it disappear, but it can create a little more room to respond rather than react.

For me, lament became a way of doing that in prayer.

Lament has deepened my prayer life and my relationship with God. I used to know in my head that He loved me. Now I can feel His affection. I'm lighter on the inside, and I have a freedom and health I didn't have before.

How to Start a Lament Prayer When You Don't Have the Words

Start small. A lament prayer doesn't need eloquent words or a quiet hour. These are the practices that have helped me most.

Figure out what you're feeling

This is harder than it sounds if you spent decades pushing feelings away like I did. [An emotions wheel can help](#). It gives you more words than "fine" and "not fine." Or just "happy" and "sad."

Some days it takes me a long time to figure out what I'm actually feeling. That's okay. Take your time.

Say it to God

Once you've named a feeling, tell God about it. If you journal, write it down. I don't happen to journal, so for me it usually happens out loud. *Lord, I'm terrified. I'm so sad I can barely stand it. I'm so tired.*

Crying out to God can be as quiet as one honest sentence.

Stay with it a little longer

Hard feelings can seem almost unbearable when you've never practiced sitting with them. My whole life, my instinct was to escape the unpleasant ones through distraction, busyness, and other forms of maladaptive coping. When I stay with it and keep telling God the truth, the feeling moves on through and is no longer so big on my insides.

Notice the apology reflex

The old grooves in me run deep. Sometimes I start to pray and realize I'm already saying sorry to God for how I feel. When that happens, I stop and remind myself that God is not mad about my feelings. Then I go back and pray it honestly.

If you automatically feel like you're disappointing God when big emotions come, notice that thought. Name it as untrue. Then exercise your faith right there. It could sound like this: *God, this is different from how I've lived. But by faith, I trust that You welcome these emotions and me, and I'm going to bring all of them and all of me to You.*

How to Write a Lament Psalm of Your Own

Writing a lament gives your grief somewhere to go. With the moms in our community, we have a practice of writing our own psalms of lament. I wrote one, too. It's vulnerable, but other parents have told me it helped them feel free to say what they'd been holding back.

My psalm follows the same basic shape as many lament psalms in the Bible. Here is how it moves, with a few lines from mine.

Call God by who He is. Mine begins, *"Faithful, kind and merciful God. You are eternal love and life."* Naming who God is reminds you who you're talking to before you say the hard things.

Turn toward honesty. After a few lines about wanting to trust God more, my psalm turns on five words: *"And still I have to ask."* The psalms of lament don't wait long to get honest, either. Psalm 13 gets there in its opening line.

Say the questions you've been afraid to ask. Write the whys. Write what feels unfair and what you don't understand. Don't soften them. My questions got very honest, and I felt guilty about that, so I wrote the guilt down too: *"I am full of guilt for asking with such boldness, but your word shows you delight in our honesty so here's more of mine."*

Name your grief. Tell God what you've lost and how tired you are. *"There's so much grief, so much loss. I am so weary, so worn."*

Ask for what you need. It can be as short as *"Help me. I need you."*

Come back to trust when you're ready. Mine ends in gratitude: *"And yet I thank you. I love you."* The closing lines of my psalm borrow words straight from the Psalms.

Look at where those verses show up. For years, I used Scripture to shut my emotions down before I had even named them. In my lament, the verses come last, after I've emptied everything out. By then, God's promises land on an honest heart.

If you aren't ready to come back to trust yet, that's okay too. [Psalm 88](#) ends in darkness, and God kept that prayer in the Bible anyway.

Your lament doesn't need to be polished, and no one else ever has to read it. [You can read my full psalm of lament here.](#)

You Can Bring All of It to God

You don't have to clean up your prayers before God will hear them. He isn't waiting for you to find the right verse or the right words. He's waiting for you.

If you want a place to start, try this tonight. Before you pray, choose one word for what you're feeling. Just one. Tell God that word, and stay there with Him for a minute before you say anything else.

I'm still learning this. Some days I catch myself apologizing before I've said a thing. But lament has given me a closeness with God that I never had when I was holding it all in.

You don't have to learn this alone. Hope for Brighter Tomorrows is a community of parents who understand, because we've lived it too. Whether your child is 7 or 47, there are parents here who get it. You can lament out loud, and no one will hand you a platitude or a Christian cliché. Instead, you'll be met with compassion, understanding, and love.

[Join Our Online Community](#)

Whenever you're ready, there's a place for you here.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the difference between lament and complaining?

Lament talks to God. Complaining usually talks about Him, or turns away from Him. The psalmists said raw, painful things, but they said them to God and kept the conversation going. A lament prayer can hold every complaint you have, as long as you bring it to Him.

Which psalms of lament can I pray when I have no words?

[Psalm 13](#) is short and a good place to begin. [Psalm 42](#) asks, "Why, my soul, are you downcast?" In [Psalm 77](#), the writer is too troubled to sleep or speak. Read one slowly and let those words carry what you can't say yet.

Can lament take the place of counseling or therapy?

No. Lament is a spiritual practice, and it works well alongside professional care. If grief, anxiety, or exhaustion is keeping you from functioning, reach out to a mental health professional who respects how important your faith is to you. That is a wise and faithful step. Prayer, therapy, and medical interventions can and do go hand in hand because God made us as whole persons, in his image and every good and perfect gift comes from him.

If your loved one is in immediate danger or you are concerned about their safety, contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988. If there is an emergency, call 911 and let the operator know your loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis.

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