

Permission to Lament

Psalms 13; 22:1-11; 88

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that God's own prayer book contains inspired complaint: that lament is faith addressed to God, not faith failing, and that one psalm ends in the dark and is still holy Scripture.

Catholic Touchstone. The Psalms are the daily prayer of the Church (Liturgy of the Hours). In the ordinary weekly cycle of the Roman Liturgy of the Hours, the darkest psalm in the book, Psalm 88, is assigned to Friday Night Prayer, the weekly memorial of the Crucifixion. The Church has never treated it as a mistake.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

By most counts, laments are the largest single category in the Psalter: more psalms cry out of trouble than do anything else. This is worth saying plainly to a group, because many Catholics were quietly taught the opposite: that good prayer is polite, and that complaint in prayer is somewhere between bad manners and sin. The inspired prayer book of Israel and of the Church disagrees.

A lament usually has an anatomy: an address (O LORD), a complaint, a petition, and a turn toward trust or praise. Psalm 13 is the perfect miniature: four cries of how long, a petition, and then the turn (vv. 5-6). Psalm 22:1-11 shows something subtler: complaint and creed braided together, alternating (vv. 1-2 complaint, 3-5 yet you, 6-8 complaint, 9-11 yet you). And Psalm 88 is the exception that proves the canon: the outstanding example of a lament that never makes the customary turn to praise or narrated deliverance. Its last word, in the Hebrew, is darkness. It was kept in the Bible anyway.

Tonight you will also need one distinction ready: the difference between lament and murmuring. Israel's wilderness grumbling (Exodus 16-17) is condemned; the Psalter's laments are inspired. The difference is not politeness but direction. The grumblers press their grievance against Moses and Aaron, and Moses tells them what it really is: murmuring against the LORD. They rewrite their own history and move away from him. The psalmists take their complaint to God's face and move toward him. Lament keeps the address line. Say plainly that the address line is a decisive sign rather than the whole test: faithful lament also stays inside the relationship, tells the truth, asks rather than defies, and leaves God his authority even while trust is anguished. Contempt, settled unbelief, and putting God on trial to have done with him are another matter, and they can be spoken in the second person too. The group will discover the core of this themselves in Q7.

A note of restraint for the leader: Psalm 22 is going to strain toward Good Friday all night, and someone may say aloud that Jesus prayed this psalm from the Cross. If they do, honor it briefly and warmly, and hold the rest: we will stand at that moment together in Session 4. Do not unpack it tonight. Planted seeds do more work than picked ones.

Pastoral note: some in the room may be in a dark season now, and one or two may hear Psalm 88 as their own biography. Give explicit permission for that, and watch for it. A person in prolonged darkness should hear from you, privately and gently, that the sacraments, a good confessor or spiritual director, and, where the darkness is heavy, a doctor or counselor are not competitors with faith but gifts of the same God. This group is a place to pray honestly; it is not a substitute for those supports.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Lament is a thread that runs the whole length of Scripture: Job on the ash heap, Jeremiah cursing the day of his birth (Jer 20), the book of Lamentations built as a funeral for a city. And the thread does not stop at the New Testament's border; it runs straight into the prayer life of Jesus. In Gethsemane he says, My soul is very sorrowful, even to death (Matt 26:38), and begs that the cup pass. The Letter to the Hebrews remembers that he offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears (Heb 5:7). The lament tradition is not abolished in Christ; it is fulfilled, taken up onto sinless lips. That is the strongest possible proof that lament and holiness are compatible.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Athanasius *Letter to Marcellinus, on the Psalms (summary)*

St. Athanasius teaches, in substance, that the Psalms are unique in Scripture: whoever prays them finds the movements of his own soul mirrored there, and prays the words as though they were written for him and about him. The laments, then, are not someone else's old pain; they are handed to you as your own words, prepared in advance by God for your own dark days.

St. John of the Cross *The Dark Night (summary)*

The Carmelite Doctor teaches, in substance, that darkness in prayer is not always God's absence. There is a darkness that is God's own work: his nearness purifying faith of its dependence on sweet feelings, since a light too strong for the eye that receives it is experienced as darkness. Not every night is dereliction. This does not explain every darkness, but it forbids one conclusion: that feeling nothing proves God is gone.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux *Story of a Soul, Manuscript C (summary)*

In the last eighteen months of her life, St. Thérèse underwent a trial of faith so dark that heaven itself felt closed to her; she describes sitting at the table of sinners, sharing the bread of sorrow with those who have no faith. She kept making acts of faith she could not feel, and offered the darkness itself for those without faith. She persevered in that trial to the end, and the Church canonized her.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- CCC 2585-2589: the Psalms are the masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament, praying for us and with us in every condition of the heart.
- CCC 2629-2631: petition begins as a cry from the depths; asking, begging, and crying out are the first movements of prayer, not its failure.

- CCC 1174-1178: the Liturgy of the Hours makes the Psalter the constant public prayer of the whole Church.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

DO NOT REVEAL · TRACK ACROSS SESSIONS

- *Psalm 22 (plant hard tonight)*. Teach vv. 1-11 on their own terms. Do not mention the Cross. If a participant raises it, affirm briefly and defer: we stand there in Session 4. The sealed sheets open the same night; the two are designed to land together.
- *The tears thread (develop)*. Ps 88 is a lament soaked in unanswered tears; if the group recalls Ps 56:8 (tears in God's bottle) from last week, connect it briefly. Resolution is still two sessions past the Cross; do not preview.
- *Sealed sheets*. Collect returned sealed sheets tonight and keep them somewhere safe and visibly sealed. If someone forgot, one more week's grace.

SESSION GOALS

1. Learn the anatomy of lament from Psalm 13: address, complaint, petition, turn.
2. Hear complaint and creed braided together in Psalm 22:1-11.
3. Face Psalm 88 without flinching, and discover that a prayer with no happy ending is still addressed prayer, still in the canon, still on the Church's lips.
4. Distinguish lament from murmuring using Exodus 16, and name the difference: the address line.
5. Write one honest lament line of your own.

THE 90 MINUTES

Opening prayer and settling in	5
Win: two opening questions	10
Build: Psalm 13, Psalm 22:1-11, Psalm 88, the discovery, and the steelman	52
Send: sharing and the writing exercise	13
Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer	10

This plan uses the full 90 minutes. If the room runs long, drop in this order: (1) the Dig Deeper box, (2) Win question W1, (3) the sharing half of Send S1. Never cut the silence after Q6, and never cut the writing exercise in S2.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

How long, O LORD? Tonight we bring you the prayers we were afraid were not allowed: the questions, the complaints, the how longs. You wrote them into your own book before we ever prayed them.

Give us the honesty of your psalmists, the courage to keep your name on the address line, and ears to hear you near the brokenhearted. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN

W1. What is the difference between complaining *about* someone and complaining *to* them? Which one takes more courage?

W2. Were you ever taught, in words or just by example, that certain feelings should not be brought into prayer? Who or what taught you that?

BUILD

Read Psalm 13 aloud.

Q1. Count the how longs. To whom is every one of them addressed? What does that address change?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Four, and every one is aimed at the LORD by name. The psalmist never talks about God to the ceiling or to his friends; he complains to God's face. The address turns complaint into relationship. This is the grammar of lament, and notice that it is faith's grammar: you do not cry how long to someone you believe has left the building.

Q2. Verses 5 and 6 turn: But I have trusted in your steadfast love. The psalm reports no change in the psalmist's circumstances between verse 4 and verse 5. So what changes?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The psalm does not report any change outside; what it shows is a movement in the praying itself, from complaint and petition to confessed trust and anticipated praise. Your steadfast love translates hesed, God's covenant loyalty. The turn is not a mood swing, and not a demanded happy ending; it is remembering whom you are talking to. Some nights the turn comes like this. Psalm 88 will show us, before tonight is over, a night when it does not.

Read Psalm 22:1-11 aloud.

Q3. Map the movement: vv. 1-2, then 3-5, then 6-8, then 9-11. What pattern do you find, and what is the psalmist doing by weaving it that way?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Complaint (1-2), then Yet you are holy (3-5), then complaint (6-8), then Yet you are he who took me from the womb (9-11). Complaint and creed, braided. Lament is not choosing protest over faith; it is refusing to let go of the creed while the protest is still being screamed. Both hands stay full. That refusal to drop either truth is the hardest and holiest thing about this psalm.

Q4. In verses 9-10 the psalmist reaches for the earliest possible memory: you took me from the womb; upon you was I cast from my birth. Why reach that far back in the dark?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Because when present evidence of God's care is invisible, lament subpoenas history. Israel's laments

remember: the Exodus, the fathers, the womb. Memory is lament's fuel, and it is one reason the Church hands us these ancient prayers instead of leaving each of us to improvise from scratch: we inherit centuries of remembered faithfulness to pray from when our own supply runs out.

Read Psalm 88 aloud, all of it, slowly.

Q5. Find the turn to praise in this psalm. Take your time.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

There is none. No turn to praise, no vow, no narrated deliverance, and no dawn of resolution; verse 13 has the psalmist praying in the morning, and the darkness outlasts it. The psalm ends, in the Hebrew, on the word darkness (v. 18). Let the group actually verify this and sit with the shock of it: the Holy Spirit inspired a prayer with no resolution, and the Church kept it in the book.

Q6. So why is Psalm 88 in the Bible? Before you answer, look again at verse 1, the address: O LORD, my God, I call for help by day; I cry out in the night before you.

Hold a full minute of silence here. Do not rescue the room from it.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Because some nights are like this. The psalm does not state God's reason for inspiring it, but its presence in Scripture shows what follows: this prayer belongs inside the life of faith, and no one in the dark has to leave the faith to tell the truth. And verse 1 hides the miracle of the psalm: the man in total darkness is still calling this God my God, still showing up day and night, still crying out before you. Psalm 88 is what faith looks like when faith feels like nothing: it keeps the address line. This is the psalm assigned to Friday Night Prayer in the Church's ordinary weekly cycle, the day her Lord lay in the tomb. She has never been embarrassed by it.

Q7. DISCOVERY. Israel complained in the wilderness too, and God condemned it. Find Exodus 16:2-3 and 16:7-8. Compare their complaint with Psalm 13. What is actually different? Look at who is addressed, what is remembered, and which way each complaint moves.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The congregation murmured against Moses and Aaron, and Moses names what it really is: your murmurings are not against us but against the LORD. They rewrite their history (would that we had died in Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots), and the whole movement is away from God and the covenant. The psalmist takes his complaint to the LORD by name, holds onto the covenant while he protests, and moves toward him. Scripture never condemns lament; it condemns the complaint that has stopped being prayer. The address line is the clearest sign of the difference, though not the whole of it: faithful lament also stays in the relationship, tells the truth, asks instead of defying, and leaves God his authority. Complaint aimed at God's face can still go wrong, and telling a friend you are struggling with God is not the wilderness sin.

STEELMAN · BUILD IT, THEN PRESS IT

Build it at full strength. A serious Christian argues: reverence means never putting God on trial. Scripture says do all things without grumbling or questioning (Phil 2:14), and Paul warns us not to grumble as Israel did, for they were destroyed by the Destroyer (1 Cor 10:10). Questioning God's goodness to his face is playing with fire; a faithful Christian brings praise, thanksgiving, and petition,

never protest. Notice this position quotes Scripture accurately and takes God's holiness seriously. Let its weight land.

Press it from the text. First: the distinction the group just discovered. What 1 Corinthians 10:10 condemns is the wilderness pattern: about-God complaint that abandons the address line. The Psalter's protests are aimed at God's face, and they are inspired: all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16). God is the author of these prayers through their human authors, and the Church puts them in our mouths as our own prayer. He is not afraid of them. Second: Gethsemane. The sinless Son says My soul is very sorrowful, even to death, and asks his Father to take the cup away (Matt 26:38-39): the honesty of lament, ending in lament's perfect turn, not as I will, but as you will. Third: Hebrews says he offered loud cries and tears, and was heard (Heb 5:7). If the all-holy Son lamented, irreverence is simply the wrong name for it.

DIG DEEPER (optional)

The Bible contains an entire book of funeral poetry for a destroyed city: Lamentations. Send the group to its heart, Lamentations 3:21-24, and ask what they find buried there. Hope, planted in the middle of the wreckage, not after it: the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning. God builds the turn into the middle of the ruin, whether or not the sufferer can see it yet.

SEND

S1. Which psalm tonight is closest to a season you have lived: 13 (the turn comes), 22 (complaint and creed braided), or 88 (the dark night)? If you are able, say why.

S2. WRITING EXERCISE (private, about five minutes). Write one honest lament line of your own, with the address on it: O LORD, and then the truth. No one will ask you to share it. Fold it into your Bible at Psalm 13.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray your written lament line once each morning this week. Just the line. Keep the address.
2. On Friday night, pray Night Prayer (Compline), or simply Psalm 88, joining the prayer the Church herself makes on that night.
3. When someone tells you something hard this week, resist supplying the turn for them: no at least, no silver linings. Let their verse 18 stand. God can handle it, and so can you.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit."

Psalm 34:18

Closing Prayer

O LORD, God of our salvation, we have cried out before you tonight, and you have not turned away. Thank you for the psalms we were never told we could pray.

Keep our complaints honest and our address unchanged. Be near tonight to the brokenhearted in this room and beyond it, and save the crushed in spirit. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Read aloud in session

- Psalm 13; Psalm 22:1-11; Psalm 88

Discovery passages (group finds them live)

- Exodus 16:2-3, 7-8 (Q7)
- Lamentations 3:21-24 (Dig Deeper)

Cited in answers and steelman

- Philippians 2:14; 1 Corinthians 10:10 (steelman, build)
- 2 Timothy 3:16; Matthew 26:38-39; Hebrews 5:7 (steelman, press)

Leader background

- Jeremiah 20:14-18; Psalm 56:8 (last week's thread, if recalled); Psalm 34:18 (memory verse)
- CCC 2585-2589, 2629-2631, 1174-1178