

Hebrews 4:14-5:10
Our Help in Time of Need

I. Intro

- A. I wonder how many Christians have prayed that the coronavirus would end. How many Christians have prayed asking that their loved ones would not get the virus, but yet did? How many prayed for recovery for loved ones who got the virus yet did not see their loved ones recover?
 - 1. I imagine a number of people have raised those prayers up to the Lord. I also imagine that the prayers have been answered both ways. Some had their prayers answered as they prayed but others did not.
 - 2. Our text tells us when we are in need then we can take our prayers to the Lord and find grace to help us “in our time of need” (Heb 4:16).
 - a. In this lesson we will focus on unanswered prayers, but I don’t want anyone to think that God does not answer prayers at all. Some prayers go unanswered. But, I can recall times when God very clearly and indisputably answered my prayers in my time of need. So while this lesson is on unanswered prayers, keep in mind God also does answer prayer. We don’t usually struggle with that.
- B. We have all taken prayer requests before the Lord and experienced answers and non-answers to our prayers. Sometimes God answers our prayers as we request and sometimes he does not.
 - 1. CS Lewis in Christian Reflections struggles with the issue of unanswered prayer. He notes that there are two ways we are told to pray in Scripture.
 - a. One is that we bring our petitions before the Father and present them before him like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane and like Jesus taught us to pray – here is my request, but “thy will be done”.
 - b. The other way Scripture teaches us to pray is to ask God anything and he will grant it. Mt 18:19 – “I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”
 - c. CS Lewis discusses the difficulty with both of these approaches and unanswered prayer.
 - 2. We have all kinds of explanations for unanswered prayer.
 - a. James tells us that we don’t get what we ask for because our motive is wrong. He implies in another part of the book that it may be that our faith is being tested and refined.
 - b. Or we go to Isaiah and talk about how God answers all prayers, it is just that his ways are different than our ways. We ask for one thing, but God has a different plan and so he answers differently. We pray that a loved one would recover from an illness and live, but they don’t and our answer is that God took them to a better place to live and answered our prayer that way.
 - 1) CS Lewis gives the example of a son who asks his father for a bike, but his father knows he needs something else and gives him a math book. The father knows best and gives his child the better thing for him.

- c. There are a host of ideas on why prayers are not answered: we don't have enough faith; we don't have the right people praying for us; we have to give God time, we have sin in our life that has to be confessed first...
- d. I don't want to rehearse all of the answers we have. Some have merit. Others don't, particularly when we give quick theological answers that in a sense try to protect God's character and promises to people who have not seen their prayers answered in their time of need. Non-believers mock such answers – and our faith - if we think we have all the answers and if we believe some of our answers. And we are fools if we think we are protecting God's character with some of our half-baked answers.
 - 1) Jimmy Buffet, a hedonist, says of our faith in Fruitcakes, "The god's honest truth is, it's not that simple". He is talking about some of the answers we give. He says "Religion is in the hands of some crazy...people". That is not what we need to be portraying.
- 3. CS Lewis at the end of his article says, he does not have any answer to the problem of unanswered prayer. He has taken it to a number of theologians across the spectrum of Christianity and can't find a satisfactory answer.
- C. So, what help is Jesus "in our time of need" (Heb 4:16) if we don't know how he is going to answer our prayers? Where is Jesus and just what is he doing in our time of need? How can or how does he help us when we need him most? Our text tells us that we can draw near to him and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:16).
- II. The NY Times (April 11, 2020) had an excellent article by opinion columnist Ross Douthat. The title of the article is *The Pandemic and the Will of God*.¹ In one part of the article he references an article in Time Magazine by N.T. Wright.² The title of Wright's article is, *Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To*.
 - A. The title of Wright's article is not the kind of thing people might be used to hearing out of Christians. Some of us Christians always have answers – and that may not be a good thing – it is not a good thing! CS Lewis said he had no answer. Douthat makes reference to the American priest James Martin who said that "the mystery of suffering is unanswerable". Smug answers don't help.
 - B. N.T. Wright's article directs us away from always seeking answers to the suffering. Instead he says, we need to "recover the biblical tradition of lament".
 - 1. Lament is where we go when we don't have an answer. It is when we cry out in prayer to God, "Why?" when it does not seem he is listening or acting. Or we challenge him with "Why?" when there does not seem to be any underlying reason for our suffering. We've done nothing wrong! (Read Ps 44:17 before spurting out a quick answer.) Or our lament may be asking God "how long?" when a trial continues. It is the type of prayer we offer when there is no clear answer to what is happening.
 - 2. A lament is a person's or community's deep felt expression in times of trouble. It is how we wrestle with our sense that God is far away from us and not acting on our behalf. A lament is not an expression of unfaithfulness or disrespect to

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-religion.html>

² Here is the link to the March 29, 2020 Time article by Wright. <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

the Lord. They are not private statements that a person utters to themselves and hopes that God did not hear us say them. They are spoken to God. They are spoken in public worship.

3. The lament occurs more often than any other type of prayer in the book of Psalms.³ Listen to a few of the questions and statements we find in the psalms of lamentation.
 - a. Ps 10:1 - Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? ... (vs 12) Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted.
 - b. Ps 13:1 - How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?
 - c. Ps 22:1 – (which Jesus cries out from the cross) - My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.
 - d. Ps 88 – In this Psalm the psalmist says that he calls to the Lord and the Lord has cast him off. His lover and his friends have deserted him and darkness is his only friend. Every time I read this Psalm I am reminded of Karen Carpenter’s 1972 song – it is actually a lament - “Goodbye to Love”, in which she sings that love has passed her by and so she will have to say goodbye to love and then “loneliness and empty days will be my only friend”. Laments are not just an OT - long ago - no longer used - expression of hurt. Laments pour out of us even today.
- C. Laments are also not simply a means of venting our sorrow, loneliness or hurt or inability to understand what was happening in a person or community’s life.⁴ A lament often asks God why he is distant – why he does not do something. And the prayer does not really get an answer to that question. Those lamenting ask God why certain things are happening in their life, but they do not really get a specific answer to that question.
 1. As we noted above, sometimes there are no answers. And the Psalmist and other biblical writers were not going to make up some half-baked – Fruitcake - explanation.
 2. The laments had a different function. They looked at the world and their life and saw that it did not square with the character and justice of God. What has the suffering person done to deserve this abandonment by God? What has the faithful, god-fearing Christian person done who is stricken with coronavirus and dies alone? What has the hard-working believer done who lost his job and now struggles to provide for his family? Why are we alone at home when we would much rather be with God’s people in church today? We can give our quick and maybe solid theological answers, but if someone gave those answers to you, how would that sit with you? I can tell you this – pat answers are no help.
 - a. A lament does not try to answer the questions. Instead through the means of a lament we go straight to God and challenge him. We challenge his silence in the face of the suffering. We ask God why he is not doing something.

³ Weiser Psalms p.66f

⁴ Wright, *ibid*

- b. And the result is not so much an answer to the “why” question, but rather to a “what” question. And that is - what am I to do in the midst of this injustice which God has allowed (destined) in this world or in my life? Look, if there is an answer to the why question – we probably will never know it. And even if God should tell us...well, read Job’s response to that – Job 42:3 – it is too wonderful ... too much for me. It is beyond his intellectual grasp.
- c. Lamenting the injustice we experience in this world takes us past the why to becoming God’s instrument of change in the world. Walter Brueggemann says, ” The loss of lament has often been accompanied by a philosophical and theological process of truce-making with the presence of evil in the world.”⁵ What he means by that is when we try to answer the question “why does God allow this evil?” then we are not asking the questions that will bring about a change in the injustice or circumstance that is causing the injustice. And so we neglect the injustice and don’t do anything about it. We are to be salt and light in the world. Through the power of God we are to make a difference.
 - 1) *Blowin’ in the Wind* by Bob Dylan was a lament. He asked in that lament, “Yes, 'n' how many years can some people exist Before they're allowed to be free?” and “Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take 'til he knows That too many people have died?” He was lamenting the civil rights situation and the Vietnam war. The purpose of the lament was not to find out why these things were the way they were, but to change them and be an instrument of change.
 - 2) That is where the lament leads us. With this coronavirus we can spend all kinds of energy asking why God allowed this when we need to be asking what changes need to be made in the world and what changes do I and we as a church need to make so that people don’t suffer alone; so that people who lose their jobs are cared for; so people don’t sit at home lonely... as we take our lament before the Lord then the right questions will come to us. What is our next step as followers of Jesus Christ in a lost world?

III. Our text in Heb 5:7 tells us that Jesus offered prayers with loud cries and tears. That sounds like a lament to me. We know on the cross he cried out in a loud voice, as we have already mentioned, “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?”

- A. We can take that same kind of prayer or lament to Jesus. And maybe we don’t get an answer to the “why” or “how long” of our lament. But what we do have is a priest in Jesus who deals with us gently and sympathetically. And in the end, that is what we need most. The knowledge that we are not going through our trials alone, but that God does hear and is present. And simply knowing that allows us to reaffirm our faith and commitment to the Lord and serve him and seek to make a difference in our world in its time of need.

⁵ Brueggemann on the Loss of Lament March 2007; The Costly Loss of Lament by Brueggemann JSOT 36 p. 57ff