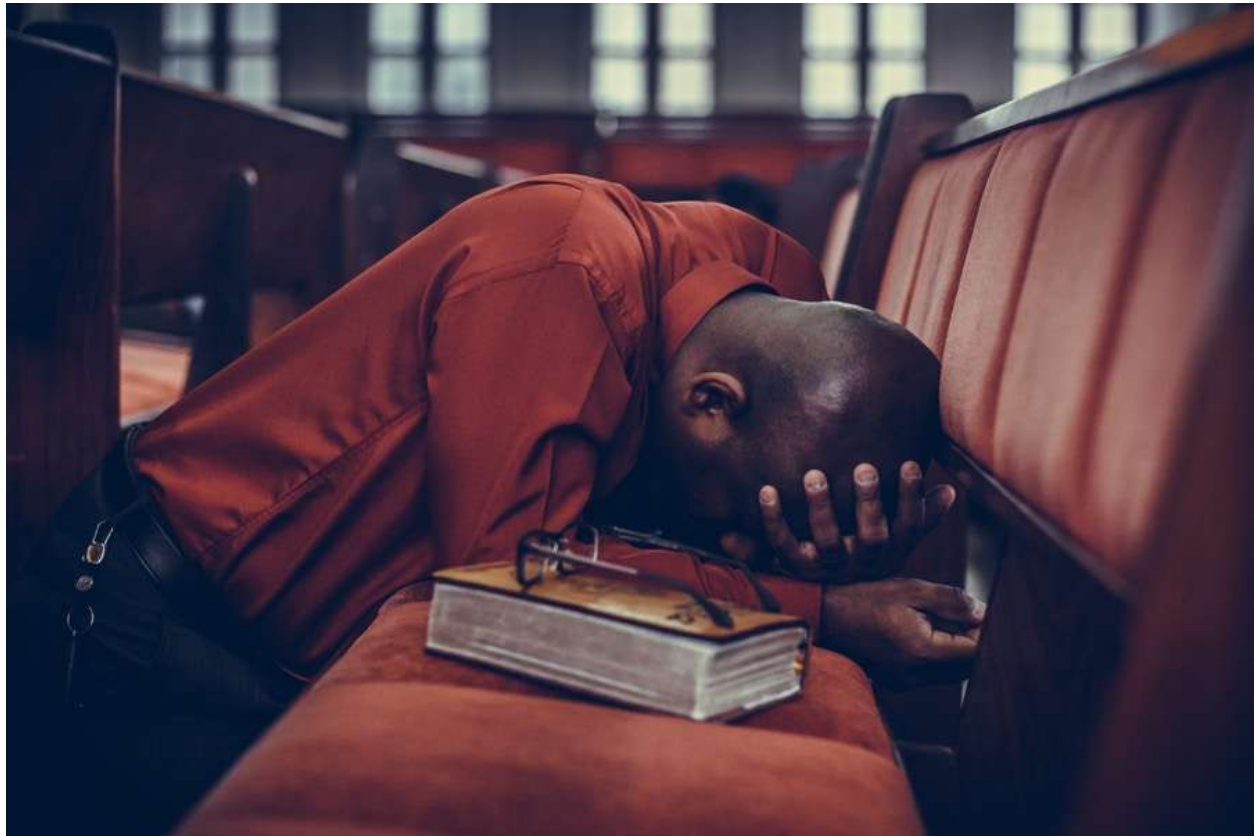


# What to Pray When Pain Takes Your Words

By Nathan Foster



**The goodness and love of the Father is ever present.** Every day brings new opportunities to respond to the invitation to become formed into his likeness. It is a call to life, a life that leads to a natural and, sometimes even, effortless freedom—freedom from the entrapment of our culture and the pride and self-centered striving that enslaves us. It is a call to live as we were created to live. It is an easy yoke and light burden. Spiritual training enables us to rightly order our habits so God can bring character transformation. Not only is honest and deep change possible, it is quite simply the way of the Jesus follower.

**The voice of the Spirit is ever calling us to our true homes, to relationship and transformation.** I assume this voice can be loud and abundantly clear, starkly awakening us from our hard hearts and blindness. Certainly the Bible is full of examples of God's direction in very clear and uncertain terms. I half wonder if God reserves using such abruptness for when we would hear in no other way. I can't imagine Paul would have had a conversion experience had he not been knocked to the ground and rendered blind. I've come to believe that growing in a life with God draws us into a place where we're able to hear and respond to the Spirit's quiet, gentle promptings in much the same way that Jesus appears to have done. We learn to recognize the tone and texture of the Spirit hovering about, leading, guiding, prompting, correcting, and loving.

**In such places, stillness of the small voice is enough.** We become content with absence. We accept loneliness. We learn obedience in the darkness of life's nights.

The last two months of my life have been almost entirely dominated by the passing of my father-in-law. During this season I have felt no real prompts to begin intentionally practicing a new spiritual discipline. My primary attention has been on caring for my wife and our kids while occasionally my own grief bubbles up. Death brings a sort of helplessness. We're not in control. We can't fix people or situations. And so I cleaned our house and filled the freezer with soup and chili while my wife sat beside a hospital bed, hugging, encouraging, praying and singing to the lone parent who raised her until his body slowly wound down and his spirit passed beyond the veil.

During these days I crafted a few prayers, but for the most part I've found I have few words to pray. At times a phrase or two finds me. I hold and repeat them, caressing them like a trusted small smooth stone, turning it over and over in my hand.

**Sometimes, when I have no words to pray, I borrow them from others:** the Psalter, The Book of Common Prayer, or other whispers from the community of saints. I wrap these words around me like a blanket on a frigid night. Safe. Protected. Known.

When I'm unable to find my own words to pray, when all I have is worn and exhausted groans, there sits the words of my brothers and sisters ushering me before the Father. Through time and space we join together, sharing a similar cry in our souls.

**And then it dawned on me. I've been practicing spiritual disciplines in these months.** The gentle nudge of the Spirit had been leading me in deep, quiet, meaningful prayer. If you'd asked me at the time, I would have said I was sort of taking a break from the disciplines, that I was tired, sad, and just trying to make it through each day. I think it was because these prayers were so helpful, so needed, so desperate that I hadn't realized this process was part of my training. In fact it just may have been of my training. If formation leads us, quote Dallas Willard, "to become people able to naturally respond to life as Jesus would if he were to live our lives," then it's quite possible some of the years of training are beginning to do their work. For prayer was a completely naturally response, as was caring for my wife. And, I've actually done fairly well at helping her. Again I question if this was the result of years of practice? I didn't particularly have to tell myself to respond to her with love, it just kind of came out. Certainly in years past I couldn't have maintained this level of care with this level of ease.

I still get caught up in the idea that I'm not really doing formation correctly if I'm not feeling stretched or pushed. If I find I'm not measuring up to the self-placed expectations of success, I tend to feel a little discouraged. This notion is so ridiculous and says a whole lot more about the system of the world than about God.

**In fact, obsession with performance or trying to be good or successful at a discipline is potentially one of the most destructive things to the spiritual life.** It almost always paralyzes us from seeking to encounter God. Rather than lead us to submission to the work of the Spirit, we

regroup and press in with the brute force of will power, which never takes us very far in the spiritual life.

I wonder if I could share a few of the prayers that I have written from this recent experience? It feels sort of strange, intimate, and vulnerable to pass these words on, but I do so in hopes that you might be encouraged to find your voice in a line or two.

**Much like the Psalmist, I've found writing out prayers can be a helpful discipline.** They serve as a scrapbook and a guide to return to in times of need. I used to just quickly jot down the prayers, but recently I've found myself drawn to craft the words with care and precision, editing, rewriting, and massaging, taking my time like an artist to paint the picture of my inner groans. Of course there is no need to be concerned with the quality of the end result. **If the words are honest and from the heart they are pleasing to God and that should be good enough for us.**

*The great dying of fall has passed  
The frozen tomb of winter has engulfed the land  
Silent fury of the darkest of days are upon us  
In winter we forget who we are  
The days run one into the other  
Lost in some primordial frost frozen in time, the foggy dream carries on  
And like a translucent cloud the memories of summer rest out of focus  
Yet it is good*

*I learn to suffer well  
Few things are better for my soul than not having my own way.  
I learn to succumb to my place in the world; vulnerable, small, loved, immortal dust,  
And it is good.*

*Your presence does not hide in this frozen wonderland.  
The way you play with water doesn't go unnoticed  
The wind-spun wonders of ice  
The beauty and intricacies of each snowflake  
Are you having fun or just showing off?  
Well, I'm impressed.  
Do you want my wonder?  
Do you want my awe?  
Well, it is yours.  
And as your spirit hovers about, casting wonders on this land  
I remain content, hoping in the great mystery of who you are  
And it is good.*

*Abba, I'm here.  
Abba, I'm here.  
Abba, I'm here.*

*Come find me.  
Come find me.  
It's dark. It's lonely.  
Come find me.  
In the midst of the chaos of this world.  
Come find me  
In the midst of the worry and managing things I can't control.  
Come find me.  
In my dreams and fears.  
Come find me.  
If you're not here I don't want to be here.*

*Abba, he's dying  
I don't know what to feel  
I don't know how to say goodbye  
I don't want regrets  
I don't want to hide from the emotions  
But it hurts  
Death—the inescapable destiny of us all  
Death—forever present  
It doesn't feel very conquered  
I'm just lost  
Utterly lost  
Come find me*

## GOD-GIVEN FRUIT FOR LAMENT

### What is the purpose of lament?

Lament is a sacred way of bringing our pain and suffering before God. It is a prayerful response that invites us to be honest about our struggles while holding onto the hope that God hears and responds. Through lament, we open our hearts, not only to grieve but to deepen our faith, seek justice, and be transformed in God's presence.

### The Fruits of Lament

1. **Lament deepens our intimacy with God.** It draws us into communion, cultivating an honest and vulnerable relationship with the One who sees and knows our suffering.
2. **Lament refines our souls.** It sifts our hearts, cultivating trust and surrender in the midst of hardship.
3. **Lament equips us to comfort others.** As we walk through our own pain with God, we gain the compassion and wisdom to accompany others in their suffering.

4. **Lament nurtures spiritual growth and maturity.** Wrestling with grief in God's presence strengthens our faith and shapes us in love.
5. **Lament conforms us to God's character.** It teaches us patience, mercy, and justice, aligning our hearts with God's ways.
6. **Lament restores the voices of the suffering.** Pain can silence us, but lament gives us words to cry out, be heard, and stand in solidarity with others who suffer.
7. **Lament is an act of truth-telling before God.** It invites us to bring our raw, unfiltered emotions, our deepest cries for justice, and our longings for change...eventually leading us to ask, "What might this moment require of me?" (Psalm 44).
8. **Lament compels us toward faithful action.** In a broken world, lament moves us beyond despair, awakening us to respond with courage, love, and justice.
9. **Lament opens the way to forgiveness.** It allows us to process pain honestly, making space for the slow work of healing and reconciliation.
10. **Lament is an act of faith.** To cry out to God in suffering is to trust that He exists, that He loves us, and that His presence remains even when we do not understand (Psalm 13:3-4).
11. **Lament reveals and reshapes our hearts.** Grief exposes the depth of our need, unraveling our illusions of control. In surrender, we are emptied and remade, as our false selves give way to the truest version of who we are in Christ. (Inspired by Pete Scazzero)

### **The Invitation of Lament**

Unrelenting sorrow can lead us into a silence that either gives way to despair...where we believe there is no hope...or denial, where we convince ourselves that everything is fine. But lament offers a different path. It is a courageous act of faith that dares to hope in God's promises, even in the midst of deep pain. Through lament, we bring our sorrow before God, trusting that He meets us there and walks with us toward healing.

### **The Depth of Grief and the Gift of Compassion**

"The depth to which we grieve our losses directly shapes the depth and quality of compassion we can offer to others. As we allow ourselves to absorb our own pain in God's presence, we are formed into people who can hold space for others in their suffering. In this sacred work, we walk with others toward Christ, bearing one another's burdens in love." (Henry Nouwen)