

What About Lament?

Interview with Verena Johnson

'You would see me just curled up on my bed in a foetal position, not wanting to go anywhere or do anything.'

When life hits you hard sometimes the only thing to do is to fall to pieces. We may try to hide the anger, frustration, and grief behind it all, but what if there's a better way?

'Sometimes I think God needs to bring us to the ends of ourselves so that we can find him there.'

Introduction to Verena

Jo: Hi, I am Jo Chamberlain from *Messages of hope*. I have with me today, Verena, and we're talking on an interesting topic about lament. So welcome Verena.

Verena: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Jo: I'd love to hear a bit more about your role within the church and perhaps something about your background in this topic of lament.

Verena: Well, I work for the Lutheran Church of Australia. I'm a church worker support officer. I'm in charge of our church's prayer ministry, and I lead the women's retreats. I've heard many stories of lament in my time working with church workers from all different parts of the church. I also have a passion for prayer ministry in my home congregation and also for women's ministry. And all of those bring me in to people with stories of suffering and pain. And I can't tell you how many people I've walked with that have been in those bad places of pain, suffering, grief, anger, loss, whatever, and helping them walk through it and come out the other side and find hope and encouragement in the midst of it.

Jo: Tell me a little bit more about this walking alongside these people.

Verena: As a Christian, sometimes it can feel like God is far away and removed. So, I'm very conscious that often I'm just being God's ears and God's face and God's eyes and God's mouth as I talk to people in those painful places. Prayer is a very big part of it. Taking the pain, the suffering, and the grief to God. Cos he's really ultimately the only person that can help with the recovery.

Jo: And I know you from our past experiences as well, Verena, just even in your nature, your kind compassionate nature, but also that ability to sit and listen and dwell with people, and not try and fix things, but just to be with them. And I really

appreciate that. And even just your spiritual connection with God too is just phenomenal. I really honour and admire that in you.

Understanding Lament

Jo: I'd love you to help me define what lament actually means. What would you say lament is all about?

Verena: Well, for me, lament is an honest, no-holds-barred outpouring of grief, anger, loss, whatever emotion it is that you are feeling. It's God-centred though. It's always directed to God. Someone once said that the difference between grieving or being upset and lament is that it's God focused. To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.

Jo: That's a very interesting insight because I can imagine even in the posture of lament, it's more than a prayer too, isn't it?

Verena: It is. It's deeper. I think sometimes when we pray, we keep it very surfacey. Whereas lament is so raw. It's, being able to basically spill your guts - the old Australian expression - to God. It comes from the gut. It comes from that raw, deep place inside of you. There's sometimes groaning and moaning, sometimes just silence because the words are too much to get out.

Jo: So even our groans and our sighs are expressed to God with words that we cannot express. I love that. Because it means then, well, you don't have to have all these perfectly elocuted words or phrases or even understand what we're experiencing, but even just that sheer emotion that's expressed is what God can actually understand and empathise with.

Verena: Yeah, because lament is basically in the midst of whatever it is that is has destroyed your life. In the Bible there's a book called Lamentations, and it's actually about this - the writer lamenting in the midst of the ruins and wreckage of his life and the lives of his people.

Lament is not waiting till things get better to talk to God or waiting till you have a good day or waiting until you know things improve a little. It's actually right in the midst of whatever's happening. It's the pain and everything that you're experiencing right then, right there. And it reminds us that God doesn't sit up there in a cloud somewhere in heaven looking down and going, 'oh, dear, dear, dear...' but is right there with us in the midst of it sitting beside us in the rubble and the wreckage and the ruins,

Jo: That imagery is so powerful and important because it's not God looking down and trying to fix anything at that moment either. It's just him sitting with you, dwelling with you, and listening to you. And to actually have that affirmation, like you pour out your heart in such a dramatic way too. I've heard people express their anger towards God, but actually being real with anger as well. Is that okay?

Verena: Absolutely. Look, God can take it. He's got really big shoulders and the thing is, like I was brought up in the Christian Church where, you know, you had to

be kind of polite to God and it was rude to yell at him or shout or something like that. But God knows what's going on inside anyway. Like why are we afraid to share what he already knows we are experiencing? And in the getting out of that stuff, there is healing and the getting out of that stuff it's releasing that dam that just gets pent up inside of us.

Jo: And it doesn't change his view of you because he already knows

Verena: He loves us anyway.

Jo: Exactly.

Verena: He already knows.

Jo: Yeah. And to even think, like you said, that there's an entire book on Lamentations makes me think that it must be something important that's important to God as well.

Verena: And you read the Psalms too, many of the Psalms are people, they're not pretty with their language, they don't hold back. They just give it to God right between the eyes. They tell God exactly how they feel. But the important thing is in all of this, that they take it to God. **You can try and take your grief, your anger, your pain, other places, but nothing works the same as taking it to God, the one who made us and loves us.**

Verena: We had with one prayer session with someone, and basically they cried for an hour. And we did virtually nothing except listen and be with them and close with a prayer, giving all of that to God. But they said afterwards, 'that was so good. I just so needed that.' They just needed a safe place to let fly really.

Verena's Personal Journey with Lament

Jo: So let me get personal then, because you're talking about lament with such an invested interest in knowing exactly what it is. But have you ever experienced lament yourself?

Verena: Oh, on a few occasions, yes. I don't think you can go through life without experiencing the need to lament. But probably the time that I most experienced it was back in 2009: I had a breakdown. I was experiencing depression. I was experiencing burnout. I had been working for my local congregation at that time and I was on their staff and I'd been through a congregational vacancy as the only kind of pastoral staff that was there. A few other things happened in my personal life as well, and yeah, it all just got too much, and I was just doing too much and trying to be too much and trying to be everything to everybody. I actually literally fell in a heap on the floor in my pastor's office because all he'd asked me to do was take on another Bible study. And it was a really horrible place because one of the things that I did, and I think people do, is I blamed God. I had been working for him. I had been serving for him. I had been slaving my guts out for him. I had been doing all this stuff for him, and believing that passage, 'I

can do all things in Christ who strengthens me,' But you know, yeah, you can do all things, but Christ might not be asking you to do all those things.

So, I actually turned my back on God for a bit and I actually chose to believe that he didn't exist. That there was no God, that he was dead. Because, the alternative was to believe that he had done this to me, or had by the very least, allowed this to happen and it was all his fault in some way or another.

So, I pursued all the standard, worldly means of help. I got a psychologist. I did all the stuff that he told me to do. I worked through stuff. I did all my grief processing, all that sort of stuff. And after five months, I was still in as big a hole as I ever was and it looked like I was never coming out of it. It just looked like it was endless.

Jo: So that place where you were at after your breakdown, what was it like for you just daily living?

Verena: Some days you would see me just curled up on my bed in a foetal position, not wanting to go anywhere or do anything. I'd given friends the permission to come into my house and a key to actually get me up and out and even get me to appointments and things, because I just couldn't do it. I'd have my phone sitting beside me on the bed and it was just too much effort to even answer it if someone rang or to let alone use it if I needed to.

Jo: And what was going through your mind at that point?

Verena: That everything was hopeless. That it was all hopeless. And just a huge numbness, just a blankness. If I wasn't sad, I was just blank and numb.

Jo: Wow. Yeah, that's really impactful. Cos then you're talking about just even how it impacts, not just you mentally or emotionally, but even physically too, to not even get out of bed. What a struggle. So, what was it that actually changed for you?

The Turning Point

Verena: Well, my dad died, which you might think would've been the final straw. But somehow, I got through the funeral and all of that. And I was the oldest sister in my family, the oldest sibling. And so, I got a lot of the organisational details and stuff, which probably were a welcome distraction. But anyway, I got through the funeral and then just decided I needed to go as far away as I possibly could from life.

And so, I got on a plane and flew to Perth to some friends in Perth. And they took me in and lent me a car and even programmed the GPS with all the best beaches and all the nearby beaches and stuff, and then left me to it. They were wonderful.

So, one day sitting on a beach in Perth, under the shade of a rock, this Bible fell out of the bag that I had with me and it just fell open. And I still to this day, don't even know why I bothered taking my Bible but I think it was because it was in my bag that I took the, just the carry-on bag. And it fell open to '*I've redeemed you, you*

are mine, and I love you.' And then I flicked another one: *'I've chosen you.'* I it was like God was almost directing my hand that day.

Jo: Can you remember how you felt in that moment?

Verena: I think I felt a bit, you know, like hit between the eyes. Like, this is all stuff I knew. This is all stuff I taught people. This is all stuff I'd prayed with people about. I prayed for other people, but I think it was just such a realisation that God was talking to me. It wasn't anybody else. It was just me that he wanted to address.

And then that night, my friend asked me whether I'd like to go to church with them. And normally I would've said no. But because of what had happened that day, I said, 'oh, okay, I think I will go to church with you, but you know, be prepared, if I walk out, I'm just walking out.' Cos I hadn't been to church for a long time.

We got there and they said, 'right, we just feel that people rely on us to do ministry and we're just really feeling a leading from God that people can minister to each other. So we would like you to look around at the people around you and then to ask God, who should I go and talk to? Who should I go and pray with?' And so this woman came from right over the other side of the church and she came up to me and she said, 'look, I just feel really strongly that God wants me to tell you that he loves you, that you are his, he's chosen you.'

Jo: If that wasn't, wasn't enough confirmation on the beach. He kind of drummed it in there, didn't he?

Verena: Oh, yes, absolutely. And then there was a sort of ministry time afterwards and one of the people who came up to me said, 'God is so pleased that you've come back to him.'

So, God was kind of back in my life, and it made all the difference. **I was still sad, I was still grieved, I was still angry, all that sort of stuff. But instead of just internalising it and looking for ways to solve it, I directed it all to God and straight away my lament found an outlet in someone who actually had the big enough shoulders to deal with it.** Before, I would've said, I was just grieving, I was angry, I was confused, I was sad. But once I started actually lamenting and directing it all to God, it made all the difference.

Jo: And that is something that is really striking me in this conversation is the fact that God sought you. And you didn't have to do a thing. You just had to be there.

Verena: I remember too, having this little conversation with God that kind of went along lines of: 'Five months! Why didn't you do this before? Where were you? Why didn't you do this?' And it was just like this voice saying, 'Would you have listened?' And the answer was no. I wouldn't.

There was something about being on that beach, being away from my life, being away from everything. I was receptive in a way that I hadn't been.

In hindsight, I can see that God was with me all the time. I just was not ready. He was right. I wasn't ready to see him. I wasn't conscious of his presence. In fact, I was so angry and I think maybe the anger had to die a little bit before he could

And I think that while I was home, there was always reminders of my pain and always reminders of the stuff that was wrong. And being away, there's just that break from it temporarily.

Jo: Yeah, and you've got that freedom to actually really experience God in the way that he wants you to be known.

Verena: And there was no expectations either by anybody. I think at home, like I kind of feel my family hovering, hoping that I would get better every day. Every time they asked me, 'how are you feeling?' It felt like a loaded question. And how are you doing today? It felt like there was some responsibility in that for me to actually start recovering or at least being able to say 'yes, maybe a little bit better' or something. I felt really bad saying, 'just the same' or whatever, and seeing their little faces drop. And, the same with my friends and stuff. You, I just felt like I had to be doing something, but nothing was happening and I wasn't feeling any better. And I felt bad about not being able to say that there was any improvement.

Jo: Yeah. And that's that constant reminder, 'I haven't fixed this yet. I haven't fixed this yet. I'm not over it yet.' And to actually be admitting that to your friends over and over again, that would be exhausting.

Verena: Yeah. And then you add guilt to the anger and the grief and the confusion, all that stuff, and shame too, because maybe there's something wrong with me. Maybe I haven't got a faith or I'm not a good Christian. Or maybe everything in my life has been a lie and I've only just been pretending. And now when everything hits the fan, this is the truth and the rest has been a lie.

Jo: That would be quite confronting because you'd make an assumption that that is now who you are, like this broken, dismembered person who's just been going through the motions and pretending.

What does healthy lament look like?

Jo: But then you did go through this period and it wasn't just a quick fix either. You actually went through that process of lament. So, share more about what that looked like for you.

Verena: Working with God to sort of go, 'okay, here's my grievance. And just giving him those things, one after the other. And sometimes it was like, it's the same thing, four or five, or 6, 10, 15, 20 times, you know, before I feel like I got it out of my system. And somewhere in doing all of that, and I can't pinpoint where, it was the reemergence of hope and the reemergence of faith and trust in this God who was listening to my endless outpours. And the beach was really good for that too, because you know how the waves roll in and they roll out again.

One day I went to the beach and it was just like my mood. It was stormy, it was grey, it was windy, it was blowing, it was all that sort of stuff, and it suited me down to the ground. Standing there in my hat and coat and all that sort of stuff, and just screaming this stuff at God. And then it was like the waves would wash it away and, God would say, 'come on, what else you got? Come on, gimme, what else?' And I would scream something else out and then 'come on, what else you got? What else you got?' And I can remember an hour of that and, I was spent, and I'm sitting on this rock, and then all of a sudden I just feel that God is there with me. He's right beside me. I had my eyes closed and I was kind of afraid to open them in case I opened them and he wasn't there. And the hope gradually grew. The trust and the faith gradually regrew.

Jo: What you're describing here for me is like this outpouring of grief, and expression of whatever your emotions were, but it was almost like it was bringing God closer, and closer, and closer. Whereas some people would think that if you share all your stuff, it would turn people away, but not with God.

So how did that change then your relationship with God?

Verena: My relationship was a lot more real, a lot more raw. God heard from me a lot more, and I was a lot more honest with him. I just tell him know what I think and what I feel. Unlike every other person in my life, I don't have to filter and I don't have to think about, 'oh, what will they think? What will they say? Will they still like me?' Because I know having been through that with God, that he loves me no matter what.

And I love that passage talking of Lamentations that says, '*the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end.*' And that's what I found. You know, his love doesn't stop. His mercies don't stop. And then it goes on to say, '*because of the Lord's great love for us, we are not consumed. For his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.*' So God is always faithful. But I love the new morning thing. It's a bit like the waves washing stuff away. It doesn't matter what yesterday brought, today is a new clean slate. It doesn't matter what you dealt with and what you went through, and what you felt, today is a new start. You know, new every morning. Every morning, those things kick in. Every morning, that new start. Every morning, his love, his grace, his faithfulness, his mercies.

So, in more recent laments, and there have been a few, it's instinctive now to turn to God and say, 'God, this is what's happening. This is how I'm feeling.'

In the midst of the rubble, in the midst of the ruins, when there is no sign of an end, when there is no sign of a way out, you're at the end of your human resources, there's God. I think that's where you meet him. And **sometimes I think God needs to bring us to the ends of ourselves so that we can find him there.**

And not rely on us and our wisdom and our knowledge and our understanding. When all that's gone, when you're in a place where you can't even function as a human being, let alone a wife or a mother or a church worker or a friend, you've got to ask the question, well, 'who am I? If you take all that away, really?'

Who am I if I can't do anything? If I remained curled up on my bed in a foetal position for the rest of my life, who am I?' And I think God's the only one that can answer you in that place, and his answer is a loud, strong, 'You are my beloved child and I will never leave you or forsake you.'

The Hope in Lament

Jo: And so now having experienced what you've experienced and, and hearing, your story of God walking with you and you giving your burdens to him, how do you feel now? What's that relationship for you like now? Or where's the hope in this lament?

Verena: The hope in the lament is that in the midst of the rubble, I know God's with me. He's not just there in the good times, in church, at prayer group, he's with me in the real down to earth, nitty gritty bits of life.

Jo: So, for someone who might be listening today who is experiencing some sort of suffering or a burden, what sort of words of encouragement could you offer to them today?

Verena: I'd say don't try to carry it on your own. You need help. At the very least, you need some human help. But the very best help is God. And God takes you as you are. It doesn't matter if you don't fully believe in him. It doesn't matter if you don't have a strong relationship with him. It doesn't matter if you think he's just a last-ditch resort or an option you haven't tried yet. I think that, **if you're in a dark place, try God. Try him and see. Give him all you've got and I think you'll find that he's there for you.**

Jo: So you've expressed how lament can happen, but for somebody who finds that quite confronting, perhaps you've grown up in the church or you've got a relationship with God, or perhaps you've just never had a relationship with God and then suddenly you want to lament, like how do you go through that? What do you do?

Verena: My thing probably would be to find a safe place. Find a place where you can shout if you want to, where you can cry if you want to, where you can be yourself and nobody's watching. Find a place where you feel connected to God. Some people it's the forest, for me, it's the beach, or a mountain or a place in your garden or whatever it is. Wherever there's a spot where you feel more you, where you feel able to just be. That's a good place to have a go at this.

But yeah, just start telling him how you feel and try not to hold anything back. And it might be that you just start with a whisper. It might be that you just do it in your head quietly. But I think being honest and the rest kind of takes care of itself. Once you get to the stage of being really honest, then your feelings start to boil out.

Or start with the Psalms. Pick one of those psalms where one of the psalmists is giving God a serve. And use those words. If you don't have the words, use those words. Use the words of Lamentations. Imagine yourself sitting in a pile of rubble

that is your life, and tell him how you feel. Sometimes using the words of others can be a start to releasing the words that you don't know how to express.

Jo: Yeah. That's powerful. And even just reading scripture aloud opens up many doors. And just even as you said before about listing, just listing all of those things that have gone wrong in your life. And perhaps even how you feel about that.

Verena: And sometimes I think you've gotta get the questions and the emotion out before you can even hear the answer. To get out everything that's stopping you from listening, stopping you from hearing, getting in the way of you and God.

And allow time. Lament doesn't happen quickly. It's not a five minute thing. Allow time to get stuff out, time to listen to God, time to be with him.

Jo: So when you are looking for answers and looking for God to speak, I mean, you talked about him literally showing you a page on in the Bible to say, read this and it's his words for you. But are there other ways that God can talk to you or ways that you allow God to speak through you?

Verena: God can speak through anything and everything. Like he spoke to me through those waves – that picture of the of the stuff being washed away, and being ready for the next thing. He's spoken to me through rocks, like this is God, he's firm and solid. I'm this storm around him and my life is this mess of whatever. And he's this solid thing.

He speaks through other people. He speaks through movies. He speaks through books. And he obviously spoke to me through those people at the church. So yeah, **God uses anything and everything to try and get through to us and most of the problem is that we are not listening or looking.**

Jo: So pay attention.

Verena: Yeah. Especially if you've just had a really big lament with God. Just give him a challenge: 'answer me.' And God will say, 'you better keep your eyes and ears open then!'

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