

FOREWORD BY JONI EARECKSON TADA

DARK
CLOUDS



DEEP
MERCY

DISCOVERING THE GRACE OF
LAMENT

M A R K
V R O E G O P

“I had never read a book like this before. If you are hurting or trying to help someone who is, or if you are attempting to lead your church to recover and experience what God’s Word teaches about lament, this is a book you will want to read.”

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Born in a father’s grief and marked with a pastor’s wisdom, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* teaches each of us and the church how to pray along the journey of loss and despair. Vroegop presents biblical guidelines for bringing honest complaint and bold petition before God and for choosing to steadfastly trust in the One whose mercies never end.”

M. Daniel Carroll R., Blanchard Professor of Old Testament,
Wheaton College

“Too often Christians feel the pressure to pretend the gospel diminishes pain, while others lament their pain void of biblical truth and hope. I have longed for years for a book to demonstrate a balance on this issue. *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* captures beautifully the unique and powerful grace of the gospel in Christian lament. The book is well written, winsome, and refreshingly transparent. I wept as I read it.”

Brian Croft, Senior Pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church, Louisville;
Founder, Practical Shepherding; Senior Fellow, Church Revitalization,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Lament is the language of exiles and aliens, of the suffering and downcast. But it is also the language of a people who know how the story ends. This book teaches us that pouring out our complaint to God is an act of faith and hope. In a world where sorrow has been politicized and death hidden away, let Mark Vroegop teach you the Christian language of lament that gives voice to our sadness and our desperate need for God.”

Abigail Dodds, author, *(A)Typical Woman: Free, Whole, and Called in Christ*

“Until Christ returns or calls us home, lament will be our God-given language for finding faith to endure in a fallen world. This book will help the church become more fluent in the language of lament and thus more conversant with the God who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition; coauthor,
A God-Sized Vision: Revival Stories That Stretch and Stir

“When our lives encounter inevitable pain, we need perspective and power to survive and thrive through the weight of the burden. Vroegop masterfully converges his own testimony of anguish with rich insight into the nature and promises of our God, who weeps, grieves, and cares deeply for his children. This book will serve as a toolbox and treasure to your soul.”

Daniel Henderson, President, Strategic Renewal International; author, *Transforming Prayer* and *Old Paths, New Power*

“This book gives real hope to those in deep valleys. Vroegop challenges us to speak up through tears and tell God what hurts in a raw and real way that results in even deeper reverence. I recommend this book to everyone who wants to hope against hope in a God who listens even when we complain, who answers even when we doubt.”

Garrett Higbee, Director of Pastoral Care, Great Commission Collective

“Lament is not just tears or pain in our own soul; lament is inviting Christ to come alongside our casket of loss. Lament is not just a prayer; it is a prayer expressing our pain in our fallen world. Lament does not stop at pain; through Christ’s comforting presence, lament enriches our trust in our Father of compassion. Anyone who wants to learn biblically *and* experientially how to candidly call out to our comforting Father would benefit greatly from this book.”

Robert W. Kelleman, Vice President of Strategic Development and Academic Dean, Faith Bible Seminary; author, *God’s Healing for Life’s Losses* and *Grief: Walking with Jesus*

“Profound. Tender. Strengthening. Crucial. Wise. This book helped me see something that’s basic to Christianity that I hadn’t fully grasped as basic. I began rereading it with my wife before finishing it the first time. Every pastor, counselor—and indeed, every Christian—should read it.”

Jonathan Leeman, Editorial Director, 9Marks; author, *The Rule of Love*

“Mark Vroegop reminds us that grief and sorrow are not the denial of God’s presence or a lack of faith in God’s sovereign care. God calls us to lament, to give expression to our pain and sorrow, which in turn leads to authentic hope, healing, and health. Vroegop shepherds our hearts and shows us the path to discovering ‘deep mercy in dark clouds.’ This book is a hope-filled treasure!”

Crawford W. Loritts Jr., Senior Pastor, Fellowship Bible Church, Roswell, Georgia; author, *Unshaken*; Host, *Living a Legacy*

“This book shouts to us from the Psalms and Lamentations: *It’s okay to cry, to grieve, to wonder why, and to come to God with our doubts and fears. Our heavenly Father can handle it. And in the end, he shows us grace and mercy.* This book is a wonderful antidote to the feel-good, happy, and superficial platitudes of so much of modern evangelicalism.”

Erwin W. Lutzer, Pastor Emeritus, The Moody Church, Chicago

“There were seasons in my life when I really needed this book but did not have it. So I have read it now with both delight and regret: delight that it is finally here and regret that it was not here sooner. I have found myself saying, ‘I wish I had known that,’ or ‘I wish I had done that.’ The sooner you read this book, the less you will say those things to yourself!”

Jason C. Meyer, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

“Mark Vroegop winsomely introduces us to the lost art of lament. From the outside, the world of lament looks dark and foreboding, but as you enter it, light will shine on your soul in startling ways.”

Paul E. Miller, Executive Director, seeJesus; author, *A Praying Life* and *J-Curve*

“Mark Vroegop has written a book that is a gift to the church—both to the one suffering and to the one who wants to help the sufferer. Through his own personal loss and practice of lament, he helpfully guides us in lament, showing us that to lament is Christian and to lament is to find hope even in the greatest pain.”

Courtney Reissig, author, *Glory in the Ordinary*

“Vroegop’s message is forged out of his personal journey, which validates the high value of healing through lament. But more importantly, he takes us to key passages of Scripture that assure us that God welcomes our agonizing cries of complaint as a step toward his grace and strength in our time of need.”

Joseph M. Stowell, President, Cornerstone University; author, *The Upside of Down* and *Redefining Leadership*

“This book is born out of personal tragedy and loss. It is a gold mine of help for those who have suffered deep wounds from loss. Mark Vroegop masterfully blends his personal life, pastoral experience, and biblical exposition into a volume that shows how God’s grace in lament and the cry of the heart in prayer teach you to trust God’s purposes.”

John D. Street, Chair, Graduate Department in Biblical Counseling,
The Master’s University and Seminary; President, Association of
Certified Biblical Counselors

“If you allow it, this book will draw tears, unveil smiles, heal old wounds, increase your biblical understanding, and bring peace. Mark Vroegop gracefully points the way to the biblical light of mercy and hope amid misery and despair. Your pain can become a platform for helping others rather than a pit of self-pity, and this book will help you arrive at that better destination.”

Thomas White, President, Cedarville University

“I am intensely grateful for *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* and would place it among the most important and influential books I’ve read in the past few years. If you are going through hard times, this book may provide more insight and comfort than any other book except for the Bible. If you are in ministry, please allow Vroegop to help you discover how ‘the grace of lament’ can serve the many hurting people in your congregation.”

Donald S. Whitney, Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate
Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Spiritual
Disciplines for the Christian Life* and *Praying the Bible*

“God has lovingly immersed one of his outstanding Bible expositors into the depths of human sorrow so that the rest of us can learn from him the important grace of lament. Through the tragic loss of his daughter, Mark has reflected deeply, studied the Bible carefully, and written beautifully to help us all walk more closely with our Savior.”

Sandy Willson, Interim Senior Pastor, Covenant Presbyterian Church,
Birmingham, Alabama

“I have watched as Mark Vroegop and his wife have navigated the difficult journey of loss, and I have witnessed in their lives the sweet fruit of godly lament. Vroegop provides a hope-filled guide to experiencing the mercy of God in the darkest nights, through the vital, healing grace of lament.”

Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, author, *Adorned*; Teacher and Host,
Revive Our Hearts

DARK CLOUDS, DEEP MERCY

Discovering the Grace of Lament

Mark Vroegop

Foreword by Joni Eareckson Tada

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Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

Cover design: Jeff Miller, Faceout Studios

First printing 2019

Printed in the United States of America

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All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-6148-1

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-6151-1

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-6149-8

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-6150-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vroegop, Mark, 1971– author.

Title: Dark clouds, deep mercy: discovering the grace of lament / Mark Vroegop; foreword by Joni Eareckson Tada.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, [2019] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018034125 (print) | LCCN 2018052571 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433561498 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433561504 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433561511 (epub) | ISBN 9781433561481 (trade paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Laments in the Bible. | Bible. Psalms—Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Bible. Lamentations—Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Grief—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BS1199.L27 (ebook) | LCC BS1199.L27 V76 2019 (print) | DDC 220.6/6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018034125>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my wife, Sarah,
who courageously walked with me
through our pilgrimage of lament.
I love you.

To my daughter, Sylvia,
whom God used to teach me that
hard is hard; hard is not bad.
We miss you.

Contents

Foreword by Joni Eareckson Tada	11
Acknowledgments	13
Introduction: Life in a Minor Key <i>A Personal Journey</i>	15
Part 1 Learning to Lament <i>Psalms of Lament</i>	
1 Keep Turning to Prayer <i>Psalm 77</i>	25
2 Bring Your Complaints <i>Psalm 10</i>	41
3 Ask Boldly <i>Psalm 22</i>	55
4 Choose to Trust <i>Psalm 13</i>	71
Part 2 Learning from Lament <i>Lamentations</i>	
5 A Broken World and a Holy God <i>Lamentations 1–2</i>	89
6 Hope Springs from Truth Rehearsed <i>Lamentations 3</i> ..	105
7 Unearthing Idols <i>Lamentations 4</i>	121
8 A Road Map to Grace <i>Lamentations 5</i>	139
Part 3 Living with Lament <i>Personal and Community Applications</i>	
9 Making Lament Personal	157
10 Let Us Lament	175

Conclusion: Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy <i>The Journey Ahead</i> . . .	189
Appendix 1 Twenty Complaints	197
Appendix 2 Psalms of Lament	201
Appendix 3 Learning-to-Lament Worksheet	203
Appendix 4 <i>But, Yet, And</i>	209
Bibliography	211
General Index	215
Scripture Index	219

Foreword

When a broken neck ambushed my life and left me a quadriplegic, I felt as though God had smashed me underfoot like a cigarette. At night, I would thrash my head on the pillow, hoping to break my neck at a higher level and thereby end my misery. After I left the hospital, I refused to get out of bed; I told my sister, “Just close the drapes, turn out the light, and shut the door.” My paralysis was permanent, and inside, I died.

You don’t have to be in a wheelchair to identify. You already know that sad situations sometimes don’t get better. Problems don’t always get solved. Conflicts don’t get fixed. Children die, couples divorce, and untimely deaths rock our world and shake our faith.

We try to manage, like jugglers spinning plates on long sticks. When we feel utterly overwhelmed, we try soaking in the tub, sweating on the treadmill, splurging on a new dress, or heading to the mountains for the weekend. We smile and say we are trusting God, but down deep we know it’s a lie. We’re only trusting that he doesn’t load us up with more plates.

That’s how I felt. But after weeks in bed, I got tired of being depressed, and I finally cried out, “God, if I can’t die, *please* show me how to live.” It was just the prayer God was waiting for.

From then on, I would ask my sister to get me up and park me in my wheelchair in front of my Bible. Holding a mouth stick, I would

flip this way and that, looking for answers—*any* answer. I sought the help of a Christian counselor-friend who took me directly to the book of Lamentations. He showed me the third chapter:

I am the man who has seen affliction . . .
surely against me [God] turns his hand
again and again the whole day long. (Lam. 3:1, 3)

I marveled, thinking, *that's me!*

I was amazed to learn that God welcomes our laments. I would eventually learn—mainly through Lamentations and Psalms—that nothing is more freeing than knowing God understands. When we are in pain, God feels the sting in his chest. Our frustrations and questions do not fluster him. He knows all about them. He wrote the book on them. More astoundingly, he invites us to come and air our grievances before him.

And for moving through pain and grief, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* is the *best* of guides. Mark Vroegop knows how to write on the subject: he's not only experienced deep suffering; he's pastored hurting people for over two decades. He shows the reader what to do with anger and depression—not sweep it under the carpet of your conscience or minimize it, but actually *do* something good with it.

If your plates are spinning out of control—if you are crying, “God, I can't live this way”—then please know that you have a companion in Mark Vroegop. Make his remarkable book your friend on this journey. Its gifted author has lived in the inner sanctum of Christ's suffering and is a faithful sage when it comes to finding practical help in the midst of pain. Let Mark guide you; let God's Spirit guide you—for hope is about to break on your horizon over the next few chapters.

Joni Eareckson Tada
Joni and Friends International Disability Center

Acknowledgments

I've wanted to write this book for over a decade. Without the support and encouragement of a host of people, it would never have become a reality.

I'm grateful for the people in two churches who were vital to my journey in lament. Calvary Baptist Church in Holland, Michigan, not only gave me the gift of serving as senior pastor from 1996 to 2008. They also cared for my family following the death of Sylvia, our daughter—even sending our family away for two weeks so we could begin the long process of healing. Our family will never forget their kindness to us when the dark clouds of unspeakable grief rolled in.

For the last ten years I've been privileged to lead the people of College Park Church in Indianapolis. Our journey through Job, Psalms, and Lamentations provided a working laboratory for every part of this book. These gracious and hungry people have devoured the Word and put it into practice in a way that continues to bring me great joy.

The elders of College Park Church graciously provided a sabbatical in 2014, when the vision for this book was birthed. Developing my skills as a writer was an objective, and Ann Kroeker became my writing coach. She was the first person to convince me not only that a book about lament was needed but also that I should write it. Her relentless

encouragement and professional advice fueled the early development of this book.

Robert and Austin from Wolgemuth and Associates took a risk on an unpublished author. Their support was invaluable. They opened doors and provided guidance along each step of this journey. Without the two of them, this book would still just be a crazy idea.

Dave DeWit from Crossway offered thoughtful coaching in the early stages of the development of the manuscript. To have a man with such skill and compassion read my messy prose was one of the many grace gifts of this process. Dave's gift of encouragement kept my self-doubts at bay.

A team of friends made my manuscript better. Tim Whitney, Dale Shaw, Debbie Armbruster, Dustin Crowe, Dennis Swender, and Jackie Halderman all provided helpful critiques and suggestions. Their input and feedback were fuel for my soul as real people engaged with my thoughts.

I'm grateful to my wife, Sarah, who has been my companion on the path of lament for over twenty-five years. I've watched her live what I write about. A mother's grief is uniquely painful, and yet she kept lamenting and trusting—never giving in to despair. I've watched her lament with more grieving mothers than I can count. I've seen mercy emerge within dark clouds as pain became a platform, not a pit.

Finally, I'm grateful for a Savior who set his affection on me and set me free from the bondage of my sin. His crucifixion and resurrection remind me that he bought the right to make everything right. I long for the day when a little grave in Graafschap Cemetery will yield the body of my daughter, and my faith will be sight.

While I expectantly wait, I lament.

Introduction

Life in a Minor Key

A Personal Journey

The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken
away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

Job 1:21

Learning to lament began on my knees.

“No, Lord!” I pleaded. “Please not this!” It was 2004, and my wife, Sarah, awakened me, concerned that something was wrong with her pregnancy. A few days from her due date, she had not slept most of the night, waiting for our in-utero baby to move. Hours of tapping her tummy, shifting positions, and offering tear-filled prayers only increased my wife’s concern. Inside her womb, stillness.

I cried out in prayer next to our bed.

Pregnancy was not new for us. Eight years earlier we were shocked to hear the word “twins” from an ultrasound technician.

Sarah carried our boys to thirty-nine weeks, nearly breaking the doctor's office record for the largest womb they'd seen for twins. Three days after delivery we carried our healthy kids home. And then, three years later, we were blessed with another son. In the four years of our marriage, we welcomed three healthy children into our lives.

Not everything in life was a breeze. We faced challenges. When our three children were born, I was the teaching pastor of a church in West Michigan. The demands on me as a young pastor were heavy. I was inexperienced, and the church never lacked for challenges. So we faced many struggles; life wasn't problem-free. However, my spontaneous prayer expressed a new depth of desperation.

I was frightened.

Later, that afternoon our doctor placed a monitor on Sarah's womb, searching for a heartbeat. Seconds passed. Multiple angles. Silence. I saw a concerned look form on his face. He suggested we move into the ultrasound room to determine what was happening. My wife's head dropped. She knew.

A few minutes later we could see our baby's body on the screen. I watched as our doctor navigated the small wand. I'd seen enough ultrasounds to know what he was looking for: the grainy flutter of a beating heart. Sarah was silent. The doctor pointed to the screen. "I'm so sorry," he said, "but the heart's not beating."

Our baby, only a few days from entering our lives, had died.

Sorrows Like Sea Billows

The crashing waves of grief in that moment were overwhelming. But our journey was only beginning. A few hours later we checked into the hospital. I sat by my wife's bed as she endured hours of labor. We prayed and cried together. About

twenty-four hours after hearing the crushing news, I held the nine-pound body of my lifeless daughter, Sylvia. As I cradled her, swaddled in a hospital blanket, I longed for her to wake up. Her fully developed body looked so normal. But there was no breathing.

She was beautiful but not alive.

I felt such piercing grief and sorrow, it's impossible to fully describe. Pain and fear mingled together in a jumbled torrent of emotion. Thoughts about the future raced through my mind. Questions haunted me: How would my boys respond to this level of sadness? Would my wife ever be happy again? What if we never conceived another child? How could I live with this pain while feeling the need to have it all together as I pastored a church? Would our marriage make it?

So many questions.

So much fear.

Discovering Lament

Following Sylvia's death, I poured out my heart to the Lord with desperate candor. I fought the temptation to be angry with God. I wrestled with sadness that bored a hole in my chest. In the midst of my pain, I began to find words and phrases in the Bible that captured the emotions of my heart. Some leapt off the pages.

The Bible gave voice to my pain. Particular psalms became my own. I read these passages before, but I had never seen them or heard them like this. A years-long journey began. In that process, I discovered a minor-key language for my suffering: lament.

Although I had been a student of the Bible for many years, biblical lament was new for me. I didn't even know what to call it at the time. I was merely trying to voice my fears and struggles while at the same time pointing my heart toward God.

My quest for spiritual survival opened my heart to this historic and biblical form of prayer.

Sorrow tuned my heart to hear the song of lament.

The gut-level honesty expressed in lament was refreshing and helpful. You see, I knew the assurances of God's love in passages like Romans 8 and others. I believed somehow God would work out everything for his good purposes. I never doubted that.

Yet my grief was not tame.

It was vicious.

I battled fears, disappointments, and sorrow. And in my journey, I discovered the grace of lament, a song I never wanted to sing. However, once I was in the crucible, I was deeply thankful for this uninvited dimension of the Christian life.

Looking back, I can see how lament became my guide, my teacher, and my solace.

The years that followed Sylvia's death were a roller coaster of emotions and challenges. We suffered multiple miscarriages and a false-positive pregnancy. However, our painful yet honest prayers helped turn our agony into a platform for worship.

Lament helped us navigate the wilderness of our grief.

Uncomfortable with Lament

However, in that journey we also learned that many Christians, like us, were unfamiliar—even uncomfortable—with lament. When occasionally I candidly shared a few of the struggles of my soul, some people reacted with visible discomfort. Others quickly moved to a desperate desire to “find the bright side,” a quick change of the subject, an awkward silence, or even physically excusing themselves to escape the tension.

When people stayed in the conversation, they often responded in unhelpful ways. In moments of attempted comfort, people said things like “I'm sure the Lord will give you another

baby,” “Maybe more people will come to faith because of the death of your daughter,” or “The Lord must know he can trust you with this.”

Every person meant well. I appreciated their attempts to address our pain. But it became clear that most people did not know how to join us in our grief.

Lament was just not familiar terrain.

Lament as Grace

As I read books on grief, I discovered many attempts to explain the purpose of pain or to walk readers through the stages of grief. While these are helpful at some level, they frequently missed or ignored the concept of lament. Finding an explanation or a quick solution for grief, while an admirable goal, can circumvent the opportunity afforded in lament—to give a person permission to wrestle with sorrow instead of rushing to end it. Walking through sorrow without understanding and embracing the God-given song of lament can stunt the grieving process.

I came to see lament as a helpful gift from the Lord.

Through this journey, I came to love Psalm 13. I had read it many times before. This time it was personal. It expressed my heart and served as a path for my grief. It kept my soul out of the ditches of despair and denial. I memorized the words. It became a help to my soul and to others in pain.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;

light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (vv. 1–6)

Through this personal odyssey, I began to see the redemptive value of lament and wonder why it was often missing. For example, I listened differently at funerals, and they seemed lament-lite. The absence of lament in our worship services also struck me. I noticed how the majority of songs were celebratory and triumphant. While I have nothing against celebration and pointing people toward hope, the depth of my grief caused me to long for the honest and candid spiritual struggle with pain. Celebration is certainly not wrong, but with a consistent absence of lament, it felt incomplete.

Through the years I began to talk about lament. I incorporated it into funeral services. I taught on it in my sermons. The effect was startling. Grieving people came out of the shadows. My life and pastoral ministry involved numerous conversations with hurting people. I began helping people discover how lament invites us to grieve and trust, to struggle and believe. I walked people through their grief by leading them—even encouraging them—to lament. I started to understand at a new level why the Psalms are so helpful to hurting people.

I began to see lament as a rich but untapped reservoir of God’s grace.

Deep Mercy in Dark Clouds

The aim of this book is to help you discover the grace of lament—to encourage you to find deep mercy in dark clouds. The

title is taken from two verses in Lamentations that seem to be a paradox. But they aren't.

How the Lord in his anger
has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! (Lam. 2:1)

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end. (Lam. 3:22)

When the circumstances of life create dark clouds, I hope you'll come to embrace lament as a divinely given liturgy leading you to mercy. This historic song gives you permission to vocalize your pain as it moves you toward God-centered worship and trust. Lament is how you live between the poles of a hard life and trusting in God's sovereignty.

Lament is how we bring our sorrow to God. Without lament we won't know how to process pain. Silence, bitterness, and even anger can dominate our spiritual lives instead. Without lament we won't know how to help people walking through sorrow. Instead, we'll offer trite solutions, unhelpful comments, or impatient responses. What's more, without this sacred song of sorrow, we'll miss the lessons historic laments are intended to teach us.

Lament is how Christians grieve. It is how to help hurting people. Lament is how we learn important truths about God and our world. My personal and pastoral experience has convinced me that biblical lament is not only a gift but also a neglected dimension of the Christian life for many twenty-first-century Christians.

A broken world and an increasingly hostile culture make contemporary Christianity unbalanced and limited in the hope we offer if we neglect this minor-key song. We need to recover the ancient practice of lament and the grace that comes through it. Christianity suffers when lament is missing.

A Journey in Lament

This book charts a course for our journey. It will take us through an exploration of four lament psalms and the one biblical book dedicated to the subject: Lamentations. In part 1, I'll try to help you learn *to* lament. In part 2, I hope to show you what we learn *from* lament. And finally, in part 3, we'll explore how to live *with* lament—both personally and with others.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, Sylvia's stillbirth would be the beginning of my discovery of lament. The path of grief created an affection for the biblical language of sorrow that would extend into other areas of my life and pastoral ministry.

My fearful prayer—"Please not this!"—was only the beginning of a providential journey of learning to love lament and the grace that comes through it. Regardless of the circumstances in your life, this minor-key song can help you.

Join me on this journey.

There is deep mercy under dark clouds when we discover the grace of lament.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your story with pain or sorrow? What painful events in your life have shaped your soul and your understanding of God?
2. What are some of the questions and struggles you frequently have to fight when you are dealing with pain?
3. What are some of your favorite passages in the Bible that bring comfort and assurance to those who are suffering?
4. How would you define lament, and what is your perspective on it?
5. When you've had to help a friend or a loved one through the pain of suffering, what are some things you've found helpful and unhelpful?

PART 1



LEARNING TO LAMENT

PSALMS OF LAMENT

Keep Turning to Prayer

Psalm 77

In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
When I remember God, I moan.

Psalm 77:2–3

Who taught you to cry? The answer, of course, is “no one.” Although you don’t remember it, the first sound you made when you left the warm and protected home of your mother’s womb was a loud wail.¹ A heartfelt protest.

Every human being has the same opening story. Life begins with tears. It’s simply a part of what it means to be human—to cry is human.

1. I’m grateful for this concept as found in Michael Card, *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 19.

But lament is different. The practice of lament—the kind that is biblical, honest, and redemptive—is not as natural for us, because every lament is a prayer. A statement of faith. Lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness.

To Lament Is Christian

Belief in God’s mercy, redemption, and sovereignty create lament. Without hope in God’s deliverance and the conviction that he is all-powerful, there would be no reason to lament when pain invaded our lives. Todd Billings, in his book *Rejoicing in Lament*, helps us understand this foundational point: “It is precisely out of trust that God is sovereign that the psalmist repeatedly brings laments and petitions to the Lord. . . . If the psalmists had already decided the verdict—that God is indeed unfaithful—they would not continue to offer their complaint.”² Therefore, lament is rooted in what we believe. It is a prayer loaded with theology. Christians affirm that the world is broken, God is powerful, and he will be faithful. Therefore, lament stands in the gap between pain and promise.

To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.

A few years ago I was leading a prayer meeting for our church staff. I placed an empty chair in a circle of other chairs. While we were singing, praying, and spontaneously reading Scripture, I invited people to make their way to the middle chair and offer a prayer of lament to the Lord. We’d been studying the subject as a church. I thought it would be good to put this minor-key song into practice. I also knew there was a lot of pain in the room.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, a brave young woman nervously moved to the middle chair. She clutched a

2. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015), 58–59.

small card and sighed. Painful emotions were just under the surface. Her husband, who also served on our staff, quickly joined and knelt beside her. Others soon followed, placing hands on their shoulders—a simple but touching demonstration of entering their grief. With a trembling voice she read her lament:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you withhold the blessing of a child from us? How long will we cry to you—how many more days, months, or years will pass with our arms remaining empty? How much longer will we struggle to rejoice with those who rejoice while we sit weeping? But I have trusted in your steadfast love. My heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me! Thank you, Father!³

In one short prayer she vocalized her deep sorrow while simultaneously reaffirming her trust. She wept and remembered. She sobbed and trusted. She lamented.

After she prayed, another staff member made his way to the same chair. “Here I am again, Lord! I don’t like this chair, but I know I need to come. My wife and I long for another baby to adopt, and we are so tired of waiting and the emotional roller coaster. But we are trusting.”⁴ By the time the prayer summit was over, four couples mourned empty cribs. Lament provided a language that anchored these grieving couples to what they knew to be true while they waited.

One reason I have written this book is my love for people who know the unwelcomed presence of pain. As a follower of Jesus, I have personally walked through my own trauma of unexplainable loss and wrestled with troubling questions. As a pastor, I’ve wept with countless people in some of the darkest moments of life.

3. From a former staff member of our church, who prefers to remain anonymous (2016). Used by permission.

4. From a staff member, who prefers to remain anonymous (2016). Used by permission.

Every Christian experiences some kind of suffering and hardship. And I've seen the difference between those who learn to lament and those who don't. I've observed the way lament provides a critical ballast for the soul. No one seeks out the pain that leads to lament, but when life falls apart, this minor-key song is life-giving.

What Is Lament?

Before we start our journey exploring four psalms and the book of Lamentations, we need to define lament. Allow me to give you a brief overview, and then we'll see what it looks like in Psalm 77.

Lament can be defined as a loud cry, a howl, or a passionate expression of grief. However, in the Bible lament is more than sorrow or talking about sadness. It is more than walking through the stages of grief.

Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.

Throughout the Scriptures, lament gives voice to the strong emotions that believers feel because of suffering. It wrestles with the struggles that surface. Lament typically asks at least two questions: (1) "Where are you, God?" (2) "If you love me, why is this happening?"⁵ Sometimes these questions are asked by individuals. At other times they are asked by entire communities. Sometimes laments reflect upon difficult circumstances in general, sometimes because of what others have done, and sometimes because of the sinful choices of God's people in particular.

You might think lament is the opposite of praise. It isn't. Instead, lament is a path to praise as we are led through our brokenness and disappointment.⁶ The space between brokenness and God's mercy is where this song is sung. Think of lament as the transition between pain and promise.

It is the path from heartbreak to hope.

5. Card, *Sacred Sorrow*, 17.

6. Card, *Sacred Sorrow*, 21.

The Pattern of Lament

Most biblical laments follow a pattern as God takes grieving people on a journey. This poetic odyssey usually includes four key elements: (1) an address to God, (2) a complaint, (3) a request, and (4) an expression of trust and/or praise.⁷ For the purposes in this book, I'll use four words to help us learn to lament: *turn*, *complain*, *ask*, and *trust*. Part 1 explores these steps, helping us to know what they are and how to put them into practice.

Each step of lament is a part of a pathway toward hope. In the address, the heart is turned to God in prayer. Complaint clearly and bluntly lays out the reasons behind the sorrow. From there, the lamenter usually makes a request for God to act—to do something. Finally, nearly every lament ends with renewed trust and praise.

In this first chapter we will see how lament begins by turning to God in prayer. We'll discover the supply of grace that comes as we take the step of faith to reach out to God. Lament invites us to turn our gaze from the rubble of life to the Redeemer of every hurt. It calls us to turn toward promise while still in pain.

The Psalms are where our journey begins.

Psalms of Lament

The book of Psalms is filled with lament. No doubt that's why it is a cherished portion of Scripture. Aren't the Psalms one of the first places you turn to when you're in pain? The Psalms were the songbook for God's covenant community. They reflect the joys, struggles, sorrows, and triumphs of life. It's noteworthy that at least a third of the 150 psalms are laments. It is

7. Stacey Gleddiesmith, "My God, My God, Why? Understanding the Lament Psalms," *Reformed Worship*, June 2010, www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2010/my-god-my-god-why.

the largest category in the entire Psalter.⁸ Whether the lament is corporate, individual, repentance-oriented, or imprecatory (strongly expressing a desire for justice), you cannot read the Psalms without encountering laments.

One out of three psalms is in a minor key. Just think about that! A third of the official songbook of Israel wrestles with pain. But consider how infrequently laments appear in our hymnals or in our contemporary songs. I find this curious and concerning. Could it be that our prosperity, comfort, and love of triumphalism are reflected in what we sing? Is it possible that our unfamiliarity with lament is a by-product of a subtle misunderstanding of Christian suffering? Don't get me wrong, there certainly is a place for celebration and joyful affirmation of the truths we believe. But I wonder about the long-term effect if the contemporary church and its people consistently miss this vital dimension of Christianity. The number of laments, their use, and their message invite us to consider the value of this biblical song of sorrow.

Laments are in the Bible for a reason.

When you put all this together, it's clear that this minor-key song is vital to the life of God's people. There's something uniquely Christian about lament, something redemptive, and something full of faith. I hope this book helps you to discover the grace of lament.

With this background, let's learn to lament by looking at the first element: turning our hearts to prayer.

Psalm 77: Keep Praying

I've chosen to start with Psalm 77 because it provides a wonderful example of the connection between lament and turning to God. It shows the beauty of pushing the heart toward God in

8. Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 1.

our pain. This psalm is filled with honest struggle, deep pain, tough questions, determined trust, and a biblical grounding. To learn how to lament, we must resolve to talk to God—to keep praying. I know that this sounds pretty basic, but it is where we have to start. Lament begins with an invitation to turn to God while in pain. Let me show you.

Cry Out to God

I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, and he will hear me.
In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night my hand is stretched out without
wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted. (Ps. 77:1–2)

The opening line of this lament, “I cry aloud to God,” frames the tone of the text. The psalmist is in pain, and yet he’s not silent. However, he is not just talking, complaining, or whimpering; he’s crying out in prayer.

Other references to prayer follow in the first two verses: “He will hear me” (v. 1b), “In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord” (v. 2a), and “In the night my hand is stretched out without wearying” (v. 2b) (a reference to a prayer posture).

Clearly the psalmist is reaching out to God in the midst of his pain. Please don’t miss this or take it for granted. It’s really important—in fact, it may be one of the reasons why you’re reading this book.

It takes faith to pray a lament.

To pray in pain, even with its messy struggle and tough questions, is an act of faith where we open up our hearts to God. Prayerful lament is better than silence. However, I’ve found that many people are afraid of lament. They find it too honest, too open, or too risky. But there’s something far worse:

silent despair. Giving God the silent treatment is the ultimate manifestation of unbelief. Despair lives under the hopeless resignation that God doesn't care, he doesn't hear, and nothing is ever going to change. People who believe this stop praying. They give up.

However, lament directs our emotions by prayerfully vocalizing our hurt, our questions, and even our doubt. Turning to prayer through lament is one of the deepest and most costly demonstrations of belief in God.⁹ James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000), who pastored the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for thirty-two years, helps us see the spiritual value of praying through our spiritual questions:

It is better to ask them than not to ask them, because asking them sharpens the issue and pushes us toward the right, positive response. Alexander Maclaren writes, “Doubts are better put into plain speech than lying diffused and darkening, like poisonous mists, in [the] heart. A thought, be it good or bad, can be dealt with when it is made articulate.”¹⁰

I wonder how many believers stop speaking to God about their pain. Disappointed by unanswered prayers or frustrated by out-of-control circumstances, these people wind up in a spiritual desert unable—or refusing—to talk to God.

This silence is a soul killer.

Maybe you are one of those who've given God the silent treatment. Maybe you just don't know what to say. Perhaps there's a particular issue or struggle that you just can't talk to God about. It feels too painful. I hope you'll be encouraged to start praying again. Or perhaps you have a friend who is really

9. Card, *Sacred Sorrow*, 55.

10. James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 2, *Psalms 42–106*, An Expositional Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 640–41.

struggling in grief. Maybe this person prays some things that make you uncomfortable—even wince. But before you jump in too quickly and hush his or her prayer, remember that at least your friend is praying. It's a start.

Prayers of lament take faith.

Pray Your Struggles

However, praying in the midst of pain isn't a guarantee the emotional struggle will immediately lift. The psalmist's description of his ongoing tension is clear:

My soul refuses to be comforted.
When I remember God, I moan;
when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah

You hold my eyelids open;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak. (Ps. 77:2–4)

He's praying, but it's not bringing immediate comfort or resolution. His prayers are not "working." Yet, he still prays.

You need to know that lament does not always lead to an immediate solution. It does not always bring a quick or timely answer. Grief is not tame. Lament is not a simplistic formula. Instead, lament is the song you sing believing that *one day* God will answer and restore. Lament invites us to pray through our struggle with a life that is far from perfect.

Pray Your Questions

Painful circumstances surface big and troubling questions. The psalmist wrestles with why God isn't doing more. He begins to "consider the days of old," to "remember my song in the night," to "meditate in my heart," and to make "a diligent search" (77:5–6). He is thinking and reflecting.

This painful search leads to six pointed rhetorical questions:

1. “Will the Lord spurn forever?” (v. 7).
2. “Will [he] never again be favorable?” (v. 7).
3. “Has his steadfast love forever ceased?” (v. 8).
4. “Are his promises at an end for all time?” (v. 8).
5. “Has God forgotten to be gracious?” (v. 9).
6. “Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” (v. 9).

Does the psalmist really believe God isn’t loving, doesn’t keep his promises, and is unfaithful? I don’t think so, and the rest of the psalm will bear this out. But he does something important here. Honestly praying this way recognizes that pain and suffering often create difficult emotions that are *not* based upon truth but *feel* true, nonetheless.

Honest, humble, pain-filled questions are part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We’ll explore this more extensively in the next chapter when we learn about complaint. For now, I simply want you to see that lament is humbly turning to God through the pain. It takes faith to lay our painful questions before the Lord.

Anyone can cry, but it takes faith to turn to God in lament.

Prayer Turns Us Around

Lament is a prayer that leads us through personal sorrow and difficult questions into truth that anchors our soul. Psalm 77:11 includes an important and repeated word: “remember.”

Then I said, “I will appeal to this,
to the years of the right hand of the Most High.”

I will remember the deeds of the LORD;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty deeds. (Ps. 77:10–12)

This is where the lament prayer makes its turn toward resolution.

In all we feel and all the questions we have, there comes a point where we must call to mind what we know to be true. The entire psalm shifts with the word “then” in verse 10 and the subsequent appeal to the history of God’s powerful deliverance.

Important phrases are connected to this remembrance: “I will appeal . . . / to the years of the right hand of the Most High” (v. 10), and “will remember the deeds of the LORD” (v. 11a). This reflection becomes personal, as if the psalmist is talking directly to God: “Yes, I will remember your wonders of old” (v. 11b), and

I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty deeds. (v. 12)

He is looking back and reflecting on the works of God in the past.

Then the focus shifts again from the historical works of God to the very character of God.

Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is great like our God? (v. 13)

Notice how different this rhetorical question is from the previous six questions! This is an important turning point. It makes lament full of grace as we turn from honest questions to confident trust.

The aim of this book is to help you understand this shift and to make it your own.

Earlier in this chapter I said that laments are possible only if you believe that God is truly good. You see, the character of God—his sovereignty, goodness, and love—creates a tension when we face painful circumstances.

Lament is how we learn to live between the poles of a hard life and God's goodness. It is an opportunity to remind our hearts about God's faithfulness in the past, especially when the immediate events of life are overwhelmingly negative. While we're still in pain, lament reminds our hearts of what we believe to be true.

Hurting people are given permission to grieve, but not aimlessly or selfishly. The biblical language of lament is able to redirect weeping people to what is true despite the valley they are walking through. I long for the experience of personal and corporate lament to be multiplied. How many Christians need to learn to lament? How many need to have their thinking redirected? I've come to love lament because of what it does in people's lives.

Pray the Gospel

Psalm 77 concludes with the ultimate moment that defined the people of Israel and their relationship with God: the exodus. The psalmist remembers this defining moment in Jewish history as God demonstrated his faithfulness and love:

When the waters saw you, O God,
 when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
 indeed, the deep trembled. . . .
 Your way was through the sea,
 your path through the great waters;
 yet your footprints were unseen.
 You led your people like a flock
 by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (vv. 16, 19–20)

Do you see what is happening here? The psalmist anchors his questioning, his hurting heart, to the single greatest redemptive event in the life of Israel. This moment defined his understanding of God's character. The exodus was an anchor for his weary soul.

For the Christian, the exodus event—the place where we find ultimate deliverance—is the cross of Christ. This is where all our questions—our heartaches and pain—should be taken. The cross shows us that God has already proven himself to be for us and not against us.

The apostle Paul even quotes a lament, Psalm 44, before proclaiming the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God:

As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:36–39)

The promise for Christians is as glorious as it is deep:

Jesus bought the right to make everything right.

Even if we are “killed all day long” or are “like sheep going to the slaughter,” nothing—no sorrow, no disappointment, no disease, no betrayal, not even death—can separate us from God's love.

Lament prayers celebrate this truth with tears.

Lament by Faith

Do you see now how uniquely Christian it is to lament? It takes faith to pray when you are in pain. Belief in God creates challenging questions, and lament provides the opportunity to reorient your hurting heart toward what is true. But in order for that to happen, you have to turn to prayer. The silent treatment must end. Frustration and discouragement might tempt you to stop talking to God.

Lament opens a door and shows you a path toward trust.

Heartfelt cries of lament are often brief or messy. They might feel a bit forced or uncomfortable. But keep talking to God. Don't allow your fear, your despair, or your track record of silence to cut off the flow of grace. Your pain can be a path toward God if you'll allow lament to be your new language.

If you don't have the words, read one of the psalms of lament out loud.¹¹ Linger over it. Let it open your heart. Let lament do its work in your life. Allow it to lead you to other aspects of this sacred song of sorrow. But whatever you do—don't stop talking to God. Keep wrestling. Keep struggling. Keep praying.

No one taught you how to cry. Tears are part of what it means to be human. But to lament is Christian. It is a prayer of faith for the journey between a hard life and God's goodness. We need to learn to lament. Through the tears, the first step is to turn to God in prayer.

Reflection Questions

1. In your own words, what makes lament Christian? Why does it take faith to lament?
2. Describe a time when you found it difficult to pray because you were suffering. What were the circumstances or the reasons for your silence?

11. See appendix 2 for a list of the various lament psalms.

3. What are some of the hard and painful questions that you've asked God over the years?
4. As you think back on God's faithfulness, where has he proven himself to be trustworthy?
5. What portions of Scripture do you use to anchor your soul to who God is?
6. How is lament connected to your theology?
7. How does the cross become the ultimate anchor and resolution for our suffering and pain?
8. Take a few minutes and talk to God about whatever is in your soul as you conclude this chapter. Tell him your pain, share your questions, affirm your trust, and ask him to keep you trusting.

Lament is how you live between the poles of a hard life and trusting God's goodness.

Lament is how we bring our sorrow to God—but it is a neglected dimension of the Christian life for many Christians today. We need to recover the practice of honest spiritual struggle that gives us permission to vocalize our pain and wrestle with our sorrow. Lament avoids trite answers and quick solutions, progressively moving us toward deeper worship and trust.

Exploring how the Bible—through the psalms of lament and the book of Lamentations—gives voice to our pain, this book invites us to grieve, struggle, and tap into the rich reservoir of grace and mercy God offers in the darkest moments of our lives.

“I had never read a book like this before. If you are hurting or trying to help someone who is, this is a book you will want to read.”

DANIEL L. AKIN, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There were seasons in my life when I really needed this book but did not have it. I have found myself saying, ‘I wish I had known that,’ or ‘I wish I had done that.’ The sooner you read this book, the less you will say those things to yourself!”

JASON C. MEYER, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

“Vroegop provides a hope-filled guide to experiencing the mercy of God in the darkest nights, through the vital, healing grace of lament.”

NANCY DEMOSS WOLGEMUTH, author, *Adorned*; Teacher and Host, *Revive Our Hearts*

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