

SONGS OF LAMENT

& the journey of

RECONCILIATION

by Michael S. Chen

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BIG IDEA

God has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation. Where do we start this journey, and how do we continue to love in a world that is filled with incredible pain and wounds too deep to even name? It's our contention that the biblical pattern of reconciliation starts with the discipline of lament; a discipline and biblical call that gives birth to a radical hope. We need the twin sisters of lament and hope to sustain us in a world mired in heartache and sad division.

OPENING QUESTIONS

In your own words, how would you define lament?

And why is lament potentially an important concept in the Christian life?

BIBLE DISCUSSION



READ: John 11:35

"Jesus wept."

This is the shortest verse in the Bible, and one of the most suggestive.



ASK: What do you think it says about the character of God and how He views us?

POSSIBLE RESPONSE: We have a tender-hearted God who grieves in the face of sin; death is the ultimate consequence of sin. God sees us in our pain and distress and desires redemption and new life. God cries out that death will not have the last word. Jesus' tears protest the way things are and hope for the way things could be.



READ: Jeremiah 31:15

Thus says the LORD

A voice is heard in Ramah

Lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children;

She refuses to be consoled for her children,

Because they are no more.



ASK: Why do you think our culture avoids lament? How do we settle for easy ways of consolation?

POSSIBLE RESPONSE: Our culture has become fixated on speed, efficiency, and keeping a distance from pain and suffering. We claim innocence and insist that we are not complicit in the suffering of others.



ASK: How does Jeremiah 31:15 give shape to Jesus' story in Matthew 2?

POSSIBLE RESPONSE: Jesus' journey begins with lament. Herod ordered the mass killing of innocent children. Imagine mass graves filled with the bodies of newborn sons. It is only in Jesus' death and resurrection as the Son of God, told in the Gospel story, that lament begins to give way to hope.

ARTICLE

WHAT IS THE SOUNDTRACK OF YOUR LIFE?

BY MICHAEL S. CHEN

The years 2014 and 2015 were full of anguish. In Ferguson, Baltimore, and New York City, young unarmed black men were killed by the police. In Charleston, a young man stepped into a church and killed congregants at a black church, hoping to incite a race war in America. These events revealed more hurt, pain, and polarizing rhetoric with respect to race in America than ever before. What happened to the victories of the Civil Rights movement? What is a faithful Christian response? Should we join ourselves to activists? Should we march or engage in prophetic acts of civil disobedience?

It wasn't until I attended a protest that I realized how much was brewing underneath the surface for me. This protest wasn't a "die in"; there were no police lines or security officers standing their ground or keeping the peace. It was a Gospel choir concert, and as I sat there listening, weeping, and praying, I thought about why the music struck a chord. I thought, this is true protest. The voices of these young people conveyed the necessity of both hope and lament. We are what we sing, and their bodies demonstrated the most powerful and beautiful theology I could imagine. Their music helped me lament, giving birth to renewed hope.

Longsuffering and lament are biblical modes of being present in a world that seems stuck in heartache and sad division, and the Psalms help get us to the deep wellsprings of hope. There is a deep connection between the Psalms and the Gospel music tradition. While in seminary, I took a class on the Psalms, and rather than focusing on the exegetical problems and translations, we studied, reflected on the Psalms and then sang a setting of every Psalm. The songs that seemed to really fit the tone and content of the Psalms came out of the Gospel music tradition which is so very well acquainted with the themes of lament, longsuffering, and redemption. These songs have a powerful and visceral way of communicating truth in a moment in church history when, in the name of triumphalism and progress, we refuse to name our deepest pains and fail to address our shameful captivity to cultural norms.

Lament is a lost language best recovered through the Psalms. Jesus himself not only read the Psalms, he prayed them. He not only prayed them, he lived them. The Psalms were the soundtrack of his life. He embodied the truth of hope and lament. As we take up their unfamiliar rhythm and cadence, we learn a poetic language that has the power to re-humanize us.

Jesus was the WORD OF GOD because he embodied in his person the transcendent word. The song of the cosmos walked among us. The reverberating sound waves that we feel in and through music came and lived a life of hope and lament in a world desperately in need of healing and reconciliation.

Has your life been (re)formed by the language and poetry of the Psalms? This might be the time to walk through the Biblical passages on lament. Over one third of the Psalms are laments that walk side by side with audacious hope. To the extent our grief is shallow, our hope will not amount to much. We need to learn how to lament, both in the context of community and as individuals.

Here are some Psalms that might launch you into deeper conversation and prayer. Particularly when we feel we don't have the words to pray, the Psalms teach us what it means to hold honest suffering and radical hope in tension in movements we have not yet experienced. This is hope that does not disappoint and refuses to acquiesce to the status quo. These Psalms of lament are songs of true protest that also proclaim the bright hope of God in the darkness.

Community Psalms of Lament: 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129

Individual Psalms of Lament: 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 36, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142

DISCUSSION

Follow up on any thoughts or questions from the article. Use these questions to deepen insight and understanding.



ASK: *What do we lose in not learning to lament?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSE: Full and realistic hope, deep connection with God and with one another, living in honesty, fullness of Christian witness, emotional and spiritual health.



ASK: *Why is it difficult to engage songs of lament in the church?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSE: Cultural expectations are that we should be doing well, happy, well-adjusted, busy, and not phased by life's mess. Lament is disruptive and even jarring.



ASK: *What cultural norms or values does lament seek to disrupt?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSE: Speed, efficiency, happiness, productivity, American exceptionalism, moral innocence (blaming others), capitalism/consumerism and pull-yourself-up theology, radical individualism. Lament can lead us to deeper community.



ASK: *How does the Gospel enable us to lament and more fully enter the ministry of reconciliation?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSE: Jesus is our shame-bearer and great lover. We are secure enough in him to give voice to our deepest pain. Deep lament as a cry to God is indicative of an intimate and covenantal relationship with him, wherein we press into the promises he has made to redeem and restore all things. He knows us in our mess and will not give up on us or the world that he has created. As we lament, the Spirit cultivates in us renewed compassion and hope.

EXERCISE

Write your own prayer of hope and lament. Share it with others in your community.

Title: _____ Lament

First line: "How long, O LORD?"

WRAP UP

Lament is not a complaint, but a cry to God that forms us to be a people of deep compassion, empathy, and longsuffering. Lament is not despair; rather, it is coming to God in a radical vulnerability that deeply transforms us. As we recognize in ourselves the propensity to apathy and anger, lament is an awakening that leads us to a deepened hope, that we might say with the Apostle Paul, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

PRAYER

We come honestly before you God.

You are the God who wept, and who continues to weep.

How long, O LORD, will your people suffer sad division and pointless suffering? Come LORD, quickly, and help us find new hope and healing as we minister your words and songs of lament. May we be formed more into your likeness through the truth that we speak. LORD have mercy.

In Jesus' name, AMEN.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Reconciling All Things by Chris Rice & Emmanuel Katongole

A Necessary Condition of Good, Loud Lament by Walter Brueggeman

Lament for a Son by Nicholas Wolterstorff

The Psalms as Christian Lament (A historical commentary) by Bruce Waltke, James Houston, and Erika Moore

A Sacred Sorrow by Michael Card

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