

YEAR OF  
BIBLICAL  
LITERACY

**1. Week 27: Prophets in Pain Part 3: Learning to Lament**

**2. Recap & Preparing for CG:**

**Daily Reading for Week:**

- Jeremiah 49-50, Psalm 26
- Jeremiah 51-52, Psalm 27
- Lamentations 1-2, Psalm 28
- Lamentations 3, Psalm 29
- Lamentations 4-5, Psalm 30
- Ezekiel 1-4, Psalm 31
- Ezekiel 5-8, Psalm 32

**Resources for Week:**

- Read Scripture Video: Lamentations
- Read: Lamentations 1-3

**3. Focus of time together:**

To understand the importance of lamentation, to learn to lament, and to practice lamenting together.

**4. Weekly ground rule / goal / value:**

**Goal:** A part of our vision for CGs at Reality SF is that they would be a safe place to try (and fail) practicing the way of Jesus together. The goal this week is to be especially mindful of this and to practice intentionally creating a safe space to practice lamenting together.

**5. Connection and Unity Exercise (Mutual Invitation, 15 minutes):**

What piece of either local or global news has affected you the most in the past few weeks and what did it make you feel?

**6. Opening Prayer:**

Read Lamentations 1 aloud as a prayer.

## 7. Intro to Discussion:

As we've discovered, the various stages of Israel's exile, which the prophets understood as God's judgment on Israel, entailed tremendous suffering. The prophets before the exile were called to warn the people of this impending judgment, which was ignored wholesale. But what was the message of those prophets living during and just after the destruction? Jeremiah is the preeminent exile prophet in a sense because he lived just before, during, and immediately following the miserable downfall of Judah. He offered warning and continued to live among the people in Jerusalem as the unthinkable occurred. Now that the forewarned destruction had befallen, and Jeremiah found himself among the survivors in ruined Jerusalem, what was he to do then? The book of Lamentations is an answer to that question.

What is a prophet to do in the midst of collapse and calamity? What are God's stricken people to do in response to their harsh judgment? In short, the people need to lament, and so Jeremiah had to lead them in lamentation and even teach them the art of lament. Eventually, Jeremiah and Ezekiel moved beyond grief and consoled the people by offering a vision of a future hope. However, great lamentation preceded any project of looking toward the future. Jeremiah and Lamentations (which he is widely accredited with) illustrates that lament is a necessary step in the road to renewal and can even teach us how to lament today.

Reality San Francisco's vision as a church is to be *a community following Jesus seeking the renewal of our city*. This is who we are, why we exist, and what we're doing in this wild and expensive city. But the path to renewal runs through tears of lament. Before we can be any part of setting things right, we must develop the capacity and courage to lament all that is wrong. Jeremiah knew this, so he instructed Israel to learn and practice lament. 2 Chronicles 35:25 even says "Jeremiah composed laments for [King] Josiah."

"So put on sackcloth, lament and wail, for the fierce anger of the Lord has not turned away from us." (Jeremiah 4:8)

"Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath." (Jeremiah 7:29)

"Now, you women, hear the word of the Lord; open your ears to the words of his mouth. Teach your daughters how to wail; teach one another a lament." (Jeremiah 9:20)

As usual, Jesus further embodied and illustrated this truth. Like Israel, He was "a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). As He hiked into Jerusalem for the last time and foresaw the destruction that would later befall because of Israel's stubborn resistance to His message of peace (an event eerily similar to the Babylonian exile Jeremiah observed 600 years earlier), Jesus stopped and "wept over the city" (Luke 19:41-44). En route to the climax of His cosmic renewal project, the Christ stopped to lament the very reality He would be dying to set right. Wrongs need righting, but they first require a response of lament.

Much can be said about Western culture's outright rejection of grief and lamentation. Indeed, in our new Instagram-framed existence, we tend to deny negative feelings of any sort and project

ourselves as always happy, always smiling. But the tragedies we see in the news everyday and the hard realities of life ought to grieve our souls. If we are to be the renewed and renewing people of God, we must relearn how to lament. This week, we will practice the way of Jesus together by practicing lamentation.

## **8. Questions for Large Group Discussion (75+ minutes):**

*Note: There will be no small-group time this week.*

### **Group Lament Exercise:**

For the rest of our time together, we will practice an exercise in lament. First, we'll try to understand more on what constitutes a lament, and then we will practice first individually and then corporately lamenting.

#### **Part 1: Understand Lament (10 minutes):**

Read and consider the following on lament:

A lament is neither a complaint, a petition, nor an explanation. While a complaint is something you say from a place of intellectual discontent, a lament is a desperate prayer you feel with your whole body. Laments don't rush to ask God for things, but rather to lament is to pound upon God's chest with our most ferocious language and to yell, "God, don't you see this?!" Finally, laments are not derived from a place of calm understanding but an experience of confusion, doubt, and despair. They don't begin with, "Thank you God for..." but rather with "Lord, you did this!" (Lamentations 2:1, 3:1) To lament is to honestly and vulnerably express your heartfelt sorrow to God in ways that many of us find very uncomfortable.

Structurally, laments fundamentally include honest description of reality (content) and an equally honest expression of the feelings this is causing (emotion).

a. **Content.** An honest recognition of the facts. What is happening? What do you see? What are you or others experiencing? What is wrong? Tell it like it is.

b. **Emotion.** A vulnerable, uncensored expression of what feelings these facts are causing. This expression of feelings must be free from a need to be orthodox or good. Rather these feelings must only be true. This is where you express aloud the ugliest and scariest parts of your heart, even such things as the raw feeling of wanting to see your enemy's children smashed to death, as expressed in Psalm 137. What are you and others feeling at the depths of your soul? When you reach the breaking point and scream aloud to God (or what feels like the void where God used to be), what words come out?

Lament therefore requires humility, honesty, and genuine sorrow. You cannot pray a lament from a place of proud composure. These are messy, uncomposed prayers. If you aren't

desperate enough to humiliate yourself (i.e. putting on sackcloth, cutting off your hair) then you are not ready to lament. Similarly, if you are not enraged enough to find the courage to be honest, then you cannot lament. And finally, you cannot muster the grief that leads to lament. Tears are a good indication of readiness to lament, though not required. If you do not feel any genuine emotion toward the wrongs in front of you, don't try to force a lament. Pray and ask God to give you His Spirit to cause your heart to be broken by the things that break God's heart.

Lastly, laments can be for your own suffering and sorrow, that of your community, or that of a group you do not belong to but yet can radically empathize with. You can lament for yourself, your family, your church or community group, your city, your nation, etc. Any suffering that gives you genuine grief is worthwhile of your lament.

### **Part 2: Practice composing a personal lament (20-25 minutes):**

Find a place in the room where you will be comfortable for the next 20-25 minutes. During this time, you will try to compose a prayer of lament for whatever sorrow from whatever aspect of your life you feel led. Consider yourself, your family, your friendships, your city, your nation/culture. If you like writing, write out the words of your prayer as they come to you. Use a note-taking app on your phone or pen/paper if you have it. If you don't like writing, then practice letting words surface in your mind and turning over them silently to see what resonates most. Discard the somewhat true laments and hold onto those that are most true.

The goal of this time is not to perform in any way or to produce anything impressive. But the aim is to try to compose a piece of lamentation, in the sense of helping your sorrow find some form and language, for the sake of better expressing yourself to God and each other. You could come up with just one sentence like, "God, divorce has ruined my family and I am so disappointed that we have been so divided." Or perhaps: "Lord, my best friend just stabbed me in the back and it makes me feel like I should never let anyone get that close to me again, and I'm not even sure I can trust you!" Or perhaps: "God, the shooting in Orlando breaks my heart. I feel sick. Why Lord, why??"

The hope is that after 25 minutes, you would have formulated some sort of lament, whether one line or many.

### **Part 3: Practice praying your lament (5 minutes):**

Have everyone stop composing but stay where you are and sit for 5 minutes with your lament. If it's written down, read it over. If it's in your head, rehearse it in your mind. Then try to stay focused on just that lament and pray it repeatedly to God silently.

### **Part 4: Reflect on praying your lament (5 minutes):**

Finally, before returning to the group, notice and reflect on how you felt praying this lament to God. What did you feel like God was feeling on the other end of your lament? Did it feel okay to pray these things or did you feel hesitant or reserved? Did it feel authentic or clumsy? Did you feel liberated? Or was this your all-time least favorite CG gathering? Did any emotions surprise you?

**Part 5: Practice sharing your lament (20-25 minutes):**

Now return to the group. Use mutual invitation to invite every person in the group to read or speak part of or all of their lament. If you don't want to share, say pass and invite another person to consider sharing theirs.

Remember, this isn't a performance. Some of us are more elegant with words and fluent in this kind of thing than others. The quality of a lament is not determined by how it sounds but by how vulnerable and brave and honest it is.

As others share their lament, practice hospitality by creating care-filled silence. This kind of silent space held by the group for the common cause of loving those in their hurting can be tremendously sacred. This is a way to serve as a priesthood for one another, creating a heaven-like pocket of safety where we can be courageous. As a dedicated listener of lament, you are meant to stay silent. Remember, Job's three friends sat silently with him for three weeks, and that wasn't long enough. And as you share as lamenter, be humble by being mentally present to your grief and directing your heart toward God rather than being self-conscious about how you may sound or worrying what people may think.

**Part 6: Practice lamenting corporately (15 minutes):**

Finally, spend time in a kind of unified corporate lament, entering into and helping voice one another's grief. Pray aloud together spontaneously. Pray in the spirit of the kind of personal laments you practiced composing and sharing. If you felt especially moved by or sympathetic to someone else's lament, repeat it aloud in your own words. Think of this like a group lament in the spirit of the unity prayer. Practicing agreeing with one another's laments and also helping carry each other's laments to God.

**Part 7: Final Reflection on the Exercise (Time permitting, 10 minutes):**

How safe did you feel to try offering a lament to the group?

Is there anything that was said or done that made you feel unsafe? Alternatively, are there any concrete ways that others in the group could have helped make this a truly safe environment to practice something new and vulnerable?

**10. Closing (5 minutes):**

Have one person end your time together in prayer.