

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, and thank you for joining us. My name is Jonathan Demers, and I am honored to serve as one of the elders of Mack Avenue Community Church.

A sincere “thank you!” to Mike, Kevin, and Milana for leading us in song and worship. Indeed, what’s true in the light is *still* true in the dark. We are continuing our series called “Psalms: the Soundtrack of a Godly Life”, and the worship team has helped us prepare our hearts for today’s theme: **Lament**. This morning’s sermon will be the first in a two-part series within the overall series, and I have the privilege of preaching both parts, with the second scheduled for July.

Our primary passage will be Psalm 130. I invite you to turn there and listen as I read verses 1-2.

1 *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!*
2 *O Lord, hear my voice!*
 Let your ears be attentive
 To the voice of my pleas for mercy!

My sermon is organized into four main parts: the Definition of Lament, the Passage of Lament, the “Depths” of Lament, and Reflections on Lament.

This is a heavy topic, particularly in light of all that we have seen of late—from an ongoing global pandemic, to the totalitarian oppression of Hong Kong, to devastatingly racist violence in America. Even just this past Friday, after helping our neighbors reduce their property taxes, our sister Edythe Ford found her home vandalized. As Christians, what are we to make of all this? How do we understand the tragedies of this world? If we are honest, we are left saying: “God, where are you? What are you doing? I know you save souls, but can you even hear me?”¹

Being candid, I have spent much of this week knowing that I, as a white person culpable in the calamitous effects of white supremacy, will almost certainly be unable to speak adequately into the experience of my black brothers and sisters. Processing these atrocities, particularly the racial violence of the past week, has turned my stomach. When I saw the knee suffocating George Floyd, pressing against his neck, I saw my knee, I saw myself. And I cannot imagine the pain that my brothers and sisters of color have felt these past few days.

And yet, family, my prayer this morning is that this examination of lament will equip us with the beginning of an answer to those questions. **My hope is that we would not only understand *what* biblical lament is, but *why* our world suffers regular occasions for these laments—that the evil in this world is the fruit of a malevolent, supernatural power hell-bent on mocking God and undermining his people.** This, I believe, is a critical first step

¹ Lecrae, “Far Away.”

worthy of its own sermon before we even really begin to examine *how* to lament. Lament itself forces us to slow down, to take account, to sit in grief and wrestle with it, before taking action.

Lastly, before we begin, please know that I have provided a copy of my notes for this sermon, which reference many scripture passages and pull from a variety of writers and thinkers. If you would prefer to sit back and listen—rather than multi-task or take notes—know that my notes will be available later today, as will a recording of the full sermon.

Please join me as we pray together.

Heavenly Father, our Creator and King, you who weep with us and groan within us, we come to you now. And we come confidently, knowing that we can draw near to you and find mercy in our time of need. Open our eyes to the forgotten practice of lament. Help us confront the brokenness of our world, and the Enemy and the Powers who foster that brokenness all around us. Father, give us the patience, the perspective, and the courage to lament well. Amen.

I. THE DEFINITION OF LAMENT

John Calvin once described the Psalms as “the anatomy of the soul.”² If that is true, then lament is the soul’s heartbeat. Of the 150 Psalms, more than one-third are considered laments. Some 42 are primarily individual, while another 16 are community-focused.

Recently, many Christians have begun turning to these Psalms of lament to try and make sense of all the suffering surrounding us. And because lament does not often play a central role in the rhythm of American church life, the language we encounter in these Psalms may seem startling and brash: “Why do you stand far off, O Lord?” demands the 10th Psalm. “Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?”³ “Be gracious to me, Lord,” prays the sixth Psalm, “for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.”⁴ They go on: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”⁵ Yes, the Psalmists of these laments often emerge into the light in the end, but not always—Psalm 88’s conclusion is marked by isolation and darkness.⁶

As we are beginning to see, Biblical lament is powerful, layered, and difficult to define. Webster’s defines the English verb form of “lament” as “crying out in grief.”⁷ That is beginning to get us somewhere. But Biblical lament is far more robust, demanding, and involving.

² Baker, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms*, p. xxxvi - xxxviii.

³ Psalm 10:1.

⁴ Psalm 6:2-3).

⁵ Psalm 13:4.

⁶ “You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.” Psalm 88:18.

⁷ “Lament” *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2020. [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lament>]

Here is my best attempt:

Lament is a prayerful expression of anguish and hope that softens our callous hearts and steadies our shaken souls. It is a stubborn insistence that things cannot remain this way, a holy anger that is put to speech, and a grief that produces a hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is to our pain what thanksgiving is to our joy.

When you think of lament, picture a bewildered and helpless toddler that's been stung by a bee or fallen unexpectedly. I imagine my son Martyn, with his swollen sting wound or scraped knee, ambushed by pain and fear, turning and leaping into my arms before his first tears fall. He longs for comfort, he demands to be heard, and he may even in some sense feel betrayed by me! And yet, he will plunge headfirst into my waiting arms. Why? Because even in the midst of significant pain or confusion, my son's actions reveal to me a trembling yet deep trust.

Not unlike the hug and tears of a wounded toddler, the Biblical depiction of lament is often coupled with physical demonstrations—crouching on the ground, covering one's head in dust or ashes, tearing one's clothes, and abstaining from food.⁸ And to be clear, lament isn't unique to the Psalms. We see it throughout the scriptures. The prophets, from Jeremiah to Hosea, lamented the coming judgment on Israel for its sins. The book of Lamentations is itself one long lament of Israel's failures and loss. And the catalysts for lament in scripture are also varied—Biblical voices lament the loss of life,⁹ heartbreak,¹⁰ helplessness,¹¹ and sin, both individual and corporate.¹² These laments are more than the release of pent-up emotions, more than catharsis. They are an exercise in faith. They are transformative for the believer. And when we are overcome with grief, our laments lead us into the arms of our Father, to whom we can confidently draw near, receive mercy, and find grace in our time of need.¹³

Of course, that is because our Father weeps too. Our God, whose Holy Spirit groans in anguish within us,¹⁴ laments both his people's sin¹⁵ and his creation's bondage to and persecution by the Enemy.¹⁶ Jesus manifests this divine lament in his own moments of searing grief—he enters into the pain of Mary and Martha and weeps at the loss of their brother, Lazarus.¹⁷ He grew

⁸ Psalm 35:13-14, 69:10-11.

⁹ Luke 8:52.

¹⁰ Psalm 130:1, Mark 14:36.

¹¹ Psalm 6:3, 2 Chronicles 20:12.

¹² Matthew 3:8, Acts 2:38, James 5:1, 2 Corinthians 7:10, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Lamentations.

¹³ Hebrews 4:16.

¹⁴ Romans 8:26-27.

¹⁵ Ezekiel 33:1.

¹⁶ Jeremiah 12:20-21, Genesis 6:6.

¹⁷ John 11:35

sorrowful at the suffering of Israel and longed to gather his people to himself.¹⁸ He sweats blood in the shadow of his own crucifixion.¹⁹ Our God is not above lament. He weeps alongside us.

Family, lament is not a sign of weakness or a failure of character. It is an essential feature of God's people as we navigate a world wounded by sin. But that isn't clean, neat, or primed for easy application. It is murky, intense, unpredictable, and at times almost violent. And that is perhaps one reason why the Western church so routinely avoids the practice of lament. Consider our worship music. A recent study examined the use of lament in major liturgical denominations and found that "the majority of Psalms omitted from the liturgy are the laments."²⁰ A second study found that laments constituted a mere 13% of the most common church hymnals.²¹ A third study found that only 5 of the top 100 contemporary Christian songs qualified as "laments."²² It seems that only the gospel tradition returns to lament frequently, something that shouldn't surprise us given the tragic and courageous history of that genre. Just understand, family, that what we encountered in today's worship music—two songs focused on lament—is the outlier experience for American churches.

But avoidance goes deeper than our musical preferences. Humans generally, and Americans in particular, find encounters with unresolved and ongoing pain completely unbearable. We desire, above all else, tidy and convenient solutions that make simple sense out of the complex. What we will not stand for, in virtually any circumstance, is uncomfortable silence and deep uncertainty. We are consumed by what Martin Luther described as "theologies of glory"—an addiction to the taste of triumph in our doctrines and beliefs, leading to overlooking real suffering all around us and ignoring the power of the cross to confront that suffering.²³

These tragic mistakes—an intolerance of silence and an addiction to triumph—lead to actions that, while soothing to our own discomfort, often compound the pain of others.²⁴ I encountered a visceral example of this five and a half years ago when I attended the funeral of my youth pastor, Dane Burk.

¹⁸ Matthew 23:37-39.

¹⁹ Luke 22:44

²⁰ Denise Hopkins, *Journey through the Psalms*.

²¹ Glen Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms*, p. 441-445.

²² Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, p. 22.

²³ "[A person] does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.... [One] deserves to be called a theologian, however, when [one] comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.... *A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is* (emphasis mine)." [<http://bookofconcord.org/heidelberg.php>]

²⁴ Consider, for example, C.S. Lewis' description of the "comfort" he received after the passing of his wife, Joy, in *A Grief Observed*. "I am told, 'Do not mourn like those who have no hope.'... They tell me [my wife] is happy now, they tell me she is at peace. What makes them so sure of this? 'Because she is in God's hands.' But if so, she was in God's hands all the time, and I have seen what they did to her. Do they suddenly become gentler to us the moment we are out of the body?"

Dane was a friend and mentor of mine, someone who I had kept in touch with even after college. Prior to serving as my high school pastor, Dane was a member of the first-ever *Teach for America* corps, a former Marine, and an international missionary. He died at the age of 49 after an extended battle with terminal cancer, and so while his passing was expected, it was still tragic. Dane left behind his wife, Loyda, and four beautiful children, none of whom had even graduated high school. When I flew into Massachusetts for his visitation and ceremony, Loyda surprised me with a request to speak at his funeral. And when it came time for me to speak the next day, I could barely look up from my notes. My brief remarks were often interrupted by my tears. I remember crumpling my notes up into my fist before walking off the stage. Later, the pastor officiating the funeral service preached a message centered on the notion that it was “his time”, Dane’s time, to go. Cliche after cliche hit like a blunt instrument to my soul. It took everything in me not to get up and leave in the middle of his message. His time? How could this pastor say that to Loyda, with tears streaming down her face, alone to raise her children, that it was Dane’s time? How could he say that to Dane’s sons and daughters, bearing a weight no child should have to bear, knowing that they would never again enjoy him as their soccer coach or walk with him down their wedding aisle? Today, Loyda has a beautiful grandchild, and another is on the way, neither of whom Dane will ever meet. And yet, this pastor could say—without blushing!—that it was Dane’s “time”? I was *infuriated*.

Family, what I encountered that day is the false comfort of Job’s friends:²⁵ words filling empty air with platitudes that, while perhaps true in a vacuum, are so deeply and profoundly repugnant when spoken to someone in the clutches of loss. They are what G. K. Chesterton called “easy speeches that comfort cruel men.”²⁶ Frankly, this isn’t an *improper* lament; it isn’t a lament at all. It is an offense to those in “the depths” of despair.

II. THE PASSAGE ON LAMENT

That phrase—“the depths”—is critical to our understanding of lament, given its role in today’s passage: Psalm 130. Let’s read it together.

- 1 *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!*
- 2 *O Lord, hear my voice!*
Let your ears be attentive
To the voice of my pleas for mercy!
- 3 *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,*
O Lord, who could stand?
- 4 *But with you there is forgiveness,*
that you may be feared.

²⁵ Job 2:11-13.

²⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *Hym*.

5 *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
 and in his word I hope;*

6 *my soul waits for the Lord
 more than the watchmen for the morning,
 more than the watchmen for the morning.*

7 *O Israel, hope in the Lord!
 For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
 And with him is plentiful redemption*

8 *And he will redeem Israel
 From his iniquities.*

The focus of our time today will be in verse 1, but I want to make several brief observations and interpretations first.

In verses 1, 2, and 5, we see that the Psalmist is addressing a present and pressing crisis. The Hebrew verbs translated as “cry” (v.1) and “wait” (v.5) are in the perfect tense in their original Hebrew, which means they could refer either to a past crisis from which the Psalmist was delivered, or a current crisis the Psalmist is praying through in the present. However, due to the use of an imperative verb (“*hear* my voice”) and a *jussive* or “command verb” (“*let* your ears...”) in verse 2, most interpreters treat this Psalm as describing a current and ongoing crisis, and they thus interpret this Psalm as a lament being given in the midst of trouble.

It is common for many of us, as Christians, to become discouraged when we feel distracted by wandering thoughts about our worries and anxieties during our times of prayer. Imminent anxieties consume our attention, and we can begin to believe that God is disappointed with our lack of focus. However, in his outstanding book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a German theologian and Nazi resister—offers better counsel. While leading a secret underground seminary during World War II, he required his students to meditate on a single passage of Scripture for two hours each day. After only a few days, some of the students began to complain to Bonhoeffer that their minds were wandering. It was unreasonable, they told him, to require this of them when they had so many worries at home. Bonhoeffer told them to stop resisting their wandering minds. “Follow your mind wherever it goes,” he said, “and follow it until it stops. Then, wherever it stops, make that person or problem a matter for prayer.”²⁷

This is a powerful encouragement! Although it can be important to focus our minds during prayer, and to pray through scripture often, we should never forget to allow our spiritual gaze to dwell on the crises or anxieties that already occupy our thoughts. God is not interested in us presenting ourselves to him sanitized and prepared; he is pleased to walk beside us through the valley of the shadow of death.²⁸

²⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

²⁸ Psalm 23:4.

In verse 6, the Psalmist's eventually hopeful response is active and vigilant, like a Watchman. This verse paints a picture of hope, not impatience. Like the rising of the morning sun after the end of a long night's watch, the Psalmist knows that God's salvation will arrive.

In his book on the Psalms, Eugene Peterson notes the same picture of hope, and how the stamina to watch and to wait comes from hope.²⁹ Christian hope, he notes, is not a fantasy. It is the active anticipation of God's already-proven faithfulness; it "harnesses our imagination with faith", Peterson says, and shapes our behavior in the present. It is the same hope that civil rights activist and theologian Howard Thurman describes in his legendary book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. "The movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of his people often calls them to act against the spirit of their times" Thurman says. "And they are given wisdom and courage to kindle a hope that inspires that action."³⁰

In verses 7 and 8, the Psalmist's lament takes a public turn. Notice how the audience shifts to God's people by the end of the Psalm. The Psalmist exhorts God's people to anchor their hope in the "steadfast love" of God. This is critical; here, he is not engaged solely in an internal monologue or a private, prayerful wrestling match with God. Because his sorrows are the sorrows of others, his lament has a public dimension.

This public dimension is critical to understanding lament. Soong-Chan Rah, a professor and expert in lament, has challenged the notion that lament is primarily or solely internal. Lament, he says, calls upon God's people to cry out against injustices that prompt our laments.³¹ He devotes his book *Prophetic Lament* to the book of Lamentations, which is itself a response to the collective culpability of God's people in the destruction of Jerusalem and collective grieving of the deep pain they experienced at the sight of their holy city's demise. A well-rounded discipline of lament consists of personal and corporate grief, and we must beware of emphasizing only one dimension in the absence of the other.

Now, returning to verse 1, we see that the Psalmist is seeking salvation from the "Powers". The Hebrew term in verse 1 translated as "the depths" is used throughout the Old Testament³² to reference the "deep waters" or "sea" that represents that cosmic and primeval forces of sin and death which rage against God and produce chaos all over the world.³³ This sea is used in Job, Daniel, and Revelation to describe the source of beasts which rise in rebellion against God.³⁴ And of course, this concept layers powerful imagery over Jesus' interaction with

²⁹ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 142.

³⁰ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

³¹ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, p. 23.

³² See Psalm 69:2, Isaiah 51:10, Ezekiel 27:34, Micah 7:19. See also, Walter Brueggemann, *Psalms*, p. 579; Alastair G. Hunter, *Psalms*, p. 218.

³³ See also, Walter Brueggemann, *Psalms*, p. 579; Alastair G. Hunter, *Psalms*, p. 218.

³⁴ Job 3:8, Daniel 7:3, Revelation 13:1.

the sea of Galilee, where Jesus' power over the chaos allows him to calm the sea,³⁵ walk across it,³⁶ and even save Peter from drowning in it.³⁷

The imagery of a sea of darkness, of depths, is gripping. This sea is dark, cold, and full of terrors. The Psalmist, like Peter, is drowning in this sea. Because he faces the threat of being consumed by the darkness and chaos emanating from these “depths” he cries out to God for the saving mercies described in verse 3. Although I can't begin to imagine how my black brothers and sisters feel, I have to think that this overwhelming sense of dread, this exhaustion that comes with “treading the water”, this lonely and cold place, describes where many of you are. But take heart, family. This Psalm answers your cries, and the cries of this Psalmist; it announces that, even from “the depths,” God hears the cries of the struggling person of faith. He is *never* beyond hearing distance,³⁸ and that his arm is *not* too short to save you and I.³⁹

III. THE “DEPTHS” OF LAMENT

I would like for us to consider even more deeply this idea of “the depths.” When we lament, we must avoid the temptation to only “skim the surface” of the sea of brokenness in our world, or to be satisfied with a shallow understanding. We must instead gaze into these “depths”—into the primeval and cosmic brokenness from which the Psalmist is seeking refuge. This brokenness is prevalent, multi-faceted, and devastating; we cannot lament well if we do not fully understand it.

And when we do that, when we begin to examine our world's wounds, we may be surprised to find that the scriptural understanding of evil, sin, and chaos has always been radical and supernatural. Christian thought, from the outset, has denied that suffering, death, and evil have any real place in creation. They are each mere cosmic “shadows”—lacking in any substance of their own and are void of any inherent purpose.⁴⁰ As Christians, we believe that we live in in what theologian David Bentley Hart describes as “the long melancholy aftermath” of a cosmic catastrophe, and that the universe itself languishes in captivity to “powers” and “principalities” that never cease in their hostility toward the Kingdom of God.⁴¹

To engage in Biblical lament, we have to grapple with these powers. Lament prevents us from ignoring their devastation; it demands we deepen our understanding of both the conflict that defines our faith and the hope we have in God. To do that, we will concentrate on two ideas developed by Hart: the Two Cosmos and the Two Kingdoms.⁴²

³⁵ Mark 4:35-41.

³⁶ Mark 6:45-56.

³⁷ Matthew 14:22-33.

³⁸ 1 Peter 3:12.

³⁹ Isaiah 59:1.

⁴⁰ I acknowledge that God may make these evils the occasions for accomplishing his good ends (such as the cross), but such an occasion is precisely why Paul describes Jesus' death as making a “mockery” of the powers.

⁴¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, p. 83.

⁴² Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*.

A. Two Cosmos

Kosmos is the Greek word translated as “world” or “creation”. We have been using words like “broken” to describe creation because, as Christians, we know it wasn’t created that way. God repeatedly celebrated his creation as “good!” and “very good!”⁴³ because, at its inception, his creation exhibited a state of universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight.⁴⁴ It was a state of affairs where the Creator openly delighted in his creation; it was a beautiful and harmonious reality; it was characterized by fulfillment, justice, and joy. In the scriptures, this reality is called **Shalom**. Often translated as “peace” in English, the scripture’s explanation of shalom means far more than the mere absence of conflict. True shalom is, as it were, the way things ought to be.

Of course, *ought* is the key word there. We are surrounded by reminders that shalom no longer reigns universally. Lofty ideals like shalom fall flat in the face of our experiences. Examples are too numerous to list. And yet, as Christians, it is important that we recognize that our world’s wounds are *not* eternal. God did not build his creation on a foundation of pain and suffering; Paul describes creation as languishing in agony, in bondage to corruption, subjected to futility, and groaning along with humanity as a mother gripped by the pains of childbirth.⁴⁵ These groans came about through sin, and they continue at the behest of an Enemy who leverages the full force of death, chaos, and deceit.

With that understanding in mind, note that the Greek word “*kosmos*” and translated as “world” appears throughout the New Testament, they often have two very different meanings.⁴⁶

Sometimes, “world” is used as a synonym for all of creation, the handiwork of God, and the object of his redemption. “For God so loved the world,” Jesus explained to Nicodemus, “that he gave his only begotten Son...[and] God sent his son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world, through him, might be saved.”⁴⁷ “I came not to judge the world,” Jesus declared, “but to save it.”⁴⁸ Even in its bondage to death, this “cosmos” bears glorious testimony to the power and righteousness of God: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.”⁴⁹ We can see glimpses of this good world, though only as through a darkened glass.⁵⁰

However, “world” is also used to indicate the “order” which enslaves creation and strives incessantly, jealously, and violently against God. When the incarnate God

⁴³ Genesis 1.

⁴⁴ Keller, *Generous Justice*.

⁴⁵ Romans 8:18-22.

⁴⁶ Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, p. 84.

⁴⁷ John 3:16-17

⁴⁸ John 12:47.

⁴⁹ Romans 1:20.

⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

appears within this “cosmos”, it is to rescue his beautiful creation from it in an act of judgment and redemption. We see this in John, where Jesus is described as a “stranger” from God who comes “from above”,⁵¹ a God-man who “was in the world, and the world was made by him, yet the world knew him not.”⁵² Jesus taught that neither he nor his kingdom were “of this world”,⁵³ that this world hates him and those he has chosen to raise “out of it.”⁵⁴ “Be of good cheer” Jesus tells the disciples, “I have overcome the world.”⁵⁵ The cosmos, in this sense of the word, is an empire of cruelty, aggression, envy, misery, violence, falsehood, greed, ignorance, and spiritual desolation. It is death working its power to dominate in and through all things, and only to destroy rather than create or make new. It is the “present evil world”⁵⁶ to which Paul says we must never be conformed,⁵⁷ and against which we are more than conquerors.⁵⁸

Grasping these two contrasting worlds helps us begin to understand the source of our laments, that sin has disrupted far more than our “personal relationship” with God. It has corrupted the entire creation. Once the shelter for all species, our world is now—as we all know well—prone to violent outbursts of plagues and natural disasters. Human societies, once destined to cultivate flourishing, now conjure war and abuse. The suffering that we have seen poured out on the people of Hong Kong, on those sick with the coronavirus, and on the black community in America, is not a suffering designed by God. He is not the architect of that pain; he is in fact working to defeat the “world” that perpetuates the pain, while also redeeming the “world” tormented and flayed by sin. Thus, when Christians look at creation, we too should see two worlds: a world in its first and ultimate reality, not simply “nature” but our Lord’s “*creation*”—an endless landscape radiant with God’s own beauty, innocent of violence, engulfed in Shalom, the object of his redemption. We should also see a world in its present state, terrible and beautiful, full of anguish and grandeur, tragedy and beauty.

B. Two Kingdoms

These two worlds also serve as a kind of battleground for a conflict between “two kingdoms”—one of God, and one of death. The conflict defines the Christian’s experience. And as disturbing as it may be to contemplate a conflict between God and anything lesser, scripture clearly teaches a kind of provisional “cosmic” battle in both the Old and New Testaments. Not an ultimate battle between two equal forces, but certainly a conflict between the powers of death and the saving love of God.

⁵¹ John 3:31, 8:23.

⁵² John 1:10.

⁵³ John 8:23; 17:14, 16; 18:36.

⁵⁴ John 15:18-19.

⁵⁵ John 16:33.

⁵⁶ Galatians 1:4.

⁵⁷ Romans 12:2.

⁵⁸ Romans 8:31-39.

Once again, let us refuse to merely “skim the surface” of the sin and brokenness in our world, and instead examine the supernatural realities which fuel and foster the brokenness we lament. By doing this, we can grapple with what we are lamenting—what has been lost— and why.

First, there is the Kingdom of God, marked by glimpses of Shalom, where God rules and reigns in the hearts of his people. It was what the prophets of the Old Testament clung to—they taught that the shalom we discussed before could flow from the righteousness of God and his people, a righteousness that is best understood in social terms, where the righteous disadvantage themselves to advantage their neighbor, while the wicked disadvantage the community for their own gain.⁵⁹ By embracing shalom, citizens of this Kingdom also embrace and engage the reality of suffering in our world.⁶⁰ Of course, Jesus was the perfect King for this Kingdom; he emptied himself, took on the form of a servant, washed his betrayer’s feet, was pierced for our transgressions, and healed us by his wounds.⁶¹ Jesus’ death made a mockery of sin,⁶² and one day, Jesus will return to make all things new.⁶³ As citizens of this Kingdom, Christians have an obligation to pursue that righteousness. “If any man be my disciple” Jesus taught, “let that person forsake all, deny himself, take up his cross and *follow* me.”⁶⁴ God’s Kingdom citizens are a people shaped by the cross of Christ. We choose peace when threatened by the sword,⁶⁵ blessing when cursed and spit upon,⁶⁶ and love towards anyone we might consider our enemy.⁶⁷ We don’t demand “rights”—we willingly relinquish them, emptying ourselves in the likeness of our savior, descending rather than elevating ourselves,⁶⁸ and finding our lives by losing them.⁶⁹ This sort of citizenship will inevitably lead to immersing ourselves in solidarity with those we once considered “far off”,⁷⁰ especially those most weighed down by the world’s brokenness.⁷¹ Indeed, Christians find Christ there,⁷² and as his Body, we have no choice but to engage.⁷³

And yet, there is also a Kingdom of Death ruled by the Powers and engaged in rebellion. In the scriptures, our condition as fallen humans is explicitly portrayed as a subjugation to the mutinous authority of demonic “powers.” These powers cannot defeat God’s governance over all things, but that does not prevent them from otherwise acting

⁵⁹ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*.

⁶⁰ Rah, *Prophetic Lament*, p. 21.

⁶¹ Philippians 2:1-9, Isaiah 53:5.

⁶² Colossians 2:15.

⁶³ Revelations 21:5.

⁶⁴ Matthew 16:24.

⁶⁵ Matthew 5:9; Matthew 26:50-53.

⁶⁶ Mathew 5:44.

⁶⁷ Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-37; Romans 12:20.

⁶⁸ Matthew 20:25-28.

⁶⁹ Mark 8:34-35.

⁷⁰ Ephesians 2:12-20.

⁷¹ Galatians 2:10.

⁷² Matthew 25:31-46.

⁷³ James 1:27.

against him within their limits. Scripture teaches that our age is ruled by these spiritual and terrestrial thrones, dominions, principalities and powers,⁷⁴ by the “elements of the world”,⁷⁵ and by the “prince of the power of the air.”⁷⁶ And while these powers cannot separate us from God’s love,⁷⁷ they contend against believers all the same. As Paul teaches, we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against “the principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual forces of wickedness in high places.”⁷⁸ This is why John’s gospel refers to the Devil himself as the “prince of this world”⁷⁹ and why Paul describes him even more shockingly as the “god of this world.”⁸⁰ This is also why the Devil is able to tempt Jesus with all the world’s glory and authority.⁸¹ John eventually goes so far as to say in his first epistle that “the whole world lies under the power of the evil one.”⁸² This Enemy, and these Powers, use deception, temptation, and everyday experiences to shape our imaginations and affections. They bring chaos down like rain and infect us with greed. They will remain a terrible enemy until the end—when death is the “last enemy that shall be destroyed.”⁸³

If we are honest, this cosmic battle between these “two kingdoms” makes sense. It explains why human history has been defined by violence. In all of recorded history, there have been only sparing moments absent of a major war, plague, cleanse, or some other form of significant death. Humans have had a notion of this cosmic battle for some time—we see it in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in half-kidding conversations about the Illuminati, and even in modern entertainment like the recent “Wonder Woman” film. In each myth and story, humans are driven by their passions for power, possessions, and legacy, and the “powers” are conniving behind the scenes to inflame those passions, incite violence, and perpetuate chaos. Because of the scripture’s teachings, we know that those horrors are not merely the result of individual human actions, but how those passions are supernaturally affected and directed.

This truth is why Christians are freed to confront systems of abuse. Specific to today, it is why Christians, including and especially white Christians, must commit themselves to tearing down the structures of white supremacy. In the blink of an eye, white supremacy murdered George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. It nearly murdered Christian Cooper as well. Family, it is the Kingdom of Death, lead by the Enemy and the Powers, which reinforces these systems of racial superiority and white fragility. It has been weaving these lies into the tapestry of every nation and society, including our own. It has cultivated a history of slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination that has, for generations, continued to poison American relationships

⁷⁴ Colossians 1:16; 1 Corinthians 2:8; Ephesians 1:21, 3:10.

⁷⁵ Galatians 4:3.

⁷⁶ Ephesians 2:2.

⁷⁷ Romans 8:38.

⁷⁸ Ephesians 6:12.

⁷⁹ John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11.

⁸⁰ 2 Corinthians 4:4.

⁸¹ Luke 4:1-13.

⁸² 1 John 5:19.

⁸³ 1 Corinthians 5:26.

and systems, and it is finding new power today in a growing white nationalist movement. Racism is no secondary issue; we don't have to choose between the gospel and racial justice. Racism is a serious offense against God that violates the innate dignity of every human. It is the kind of treacherous cruelty, in all its subtle and explicit forms, that openly mocks the values of God's Kingdom and sneers at the promise of Jesus' restoration of all things. The Powers *know* this. They flaunt this lie, entrench it deeper into our society, fully aware it is an abomination in the sight of God.

The Kingdom of God stands in condemnation over not only the specific moments of injustice, but the systems that birth them. Our King humiliates the proud and undercuts the unjust.⁸⁴ His kingdom is a declaration that *all* people are created in God's image,⁸⁵ that God made from one man every nation of humanity,⁸⁶ and that the whole teaching of scripture depends on loving our neighbors as ourselves.⁸⁷ Our king desires justice and mercy, not sacrifice and treasure.⁸⁸ He searches our hearts and commands us to correct oppression.⁸⁹ He condemns favoritism and impartiality,⁹⁰ and he welcomes prayers that confess the guilt of an entire community.⁹¹ In God's Kingdom, all are one in Christ,⁹² and all are given the same Spirit.⁹³ And one day, our King—who was himself oppressed, and who himself met an unjust death at the hands of the Powers—will return with a holy righteousness to judge for the poor and oppressed, decide for the meek, and strike down the wicked.⁹⁴ On that day, a Kingdom made up of people from *every* nation, tribe, and people will stand before the throne and praise the Lamb who was slain.⁹⁵

IV. REFLECTIONS ON LAMENT

So, the question now is how do we take this understanding of “the depths”, inform our faith, and shape our lament accordingly? As Christians and citizens of God's Kingdom, we are equipped to engage in that conflict,⁹⁶ and action is required. But to do that well, we *must* begin with lament. And to that end, I would like to offer three reflections.

First, Lament is the essential “middle step” between encountering brokenness and responding with action. Lament forces us to pause, recognize the larger forces at work, acknowledge our own culpability, seek solidarity with the hurting, and mourn their loss.

⁸⁴ Isaiah 2:11-22.

⁸⁵ Genesis 1:26.

⁸⁶ Acts 17:26.

⁸⁷ Matthew 22:35-40.

⁸⁸ Micah 6:6-8.

⁸⁹ Jeremiah 17:10.

⁹⁰ James 2:9.

⁹¹ Daniel 9:3-19.

⁹² Galatians 3:28.

⁹³ 1 Corinthians 12:13.

⁹⁴ Isaiah 11:1-6.

⁹⁵ Revelation 7:9-10.

⁹⁶ Ephesians 6:10-18.

What I have begun to realize, and what I hope we all see in this sermon, is that lament is essential for moments like ours. We often want so desperately to jump into action, and yet that desire to “do something” without committing to the hard work of self-reflection and lament will likely be counterproductive. In truth, this is why I chose to reserve the “how” of lament for an entirely separate sermon; we are far too eager to get *there*. Lament prevents this; it also cultivates the quiet space, the posture that is needed to stoke our spiritual imaginations. It is from here that we can “emerge with new possibilities, new acts of kindness...[and] new hope.”⁹⁷ This doesn’t mean we never act, only that when we act, we do so having had our imaginations and souls shaped by lament.

Now, for a moment, I want to speak to my white brothers and sisters. Of course, all of you are my brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, and I am grateful for the bonds we have in him, and how those bonds are greater than anything else that can be divided. But for just a moment, I want to address my white church family.

In the context of present day racial violence, you and I—white American Christians—must see our need to lament as an opportunity to educate ourselves about America’s racialized history before satisfying any impulse to act. We must begin to disentangle ourselves from the “superhero complex” that we are force fed in almost every realm of our lives.

We encounter this complex in our schooling, where the achievements of white men are sanitized, their atrocities are minimized, and the genuine accomplishments of their historical peers of color are ignored, forgotten, and even eradicated. Colonization becomes “discovery”, and cruel wars become “crusades”. We also see it in film and television, where lead after lead is cast white. Superheroes and soldiers, detectives and daredevils, champions and cartoon characters, entertainers and Emmy-award winners. Even historically-based characters of color are frequently miscast as white. Many of us are surrounded by it in our communities, where our classmates and coaches, pals and police officers, babysitters and baristas all look like us. And whenever that homogeneity and familiarity begins to change, we fight—and oh, do we fight!—or we flee. We consume this complex in our reading, where the authors crafting our stories, teaching our lessons, editing our newspapers, compiling our research, and creating our fictional worlds are predominately—and, in some cases, exclusively—white. We embrace it in our leaders, the CEOs and senators, managing partners and board members, team owners and trustees, governors and mayors. Their seats have been largely occupied and passed down from one white person to another. We even see it in our religion; the American evangelical Christian faith, beholden to a blonde-haired, European-looking Jesus, has whitewashed its tradition’s history of violence against brothers and sisters of color, and our haphazard calls for “racial reconciliation” can be as hollow as our political principles.

⁹⁷ N.T. Wright, “Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It’s Not Supposed To.” *TIME Magazine*. March 29, 2020. [<https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>]

All of these pervasive dynamics have enormous persuasive power. They teach white people dysfunctional values that lead to violence against our black neighbors. And yet, despite how ubiquitous and dangerous these dynamics are, they remain enormously difficult for white people to point out to one another—like amateur handymen examining the foundation of a house, cracking ever so imperceptibly beneath the surface. To carry that metaphor to a breaking point—ha!—we should trust the expertise of the professional inspectors, scrutinize those weaknesses, roll up our sleeves, and do the dirty work together to tear down and rebuild the house.

To be clear, I am not saying that white people should take on an unshakeable and paralyzing white guilt forever, or that white people should engage in some kind of self-hate. Not at all. I *love* my beautiful white wife and children! But I abhor the system of white supremacy that affords me privilege and perpetuates injustice. It has taken me years to recognize that our privileged history has run parallel to a history of pain, it will take many more years to continue to wrestle with the toxic effect of this reality on my soul. Lament is the time for this.

Second, Lament delivers us from hollow or misguided answers to brokenness. Trite responses to suffering are not the only way we can worsen a broken situation. Even now, some Christians have already begun to teach that the world's suffering—and the Coronavirus specifically—has been sent by God as a judgment, and that God means for people to suffer and die so that the living can learn important lessons.⁹⁸ Only a person sitting in a place of privilege could teach this type of doctrine. This line of thinking would lead us to conclude that God ordains every instance of evil, including each time a black person is killed by the state. Let me be clear, particularly to my brothers and sisters of color: this evil is not a judgment on the black community, and God is not trying to teach some kind of lesson about suffering. We flatly *reject* any such idea as fatal error in teaching that has no place in our faith. Natural disasters, diseases, disorders, and chaos are the tools of the Powers, not God. And while God can and does bring undeniable good out of those horrors—particularly when his people respond to those horrors with the self-emptying love of Christ—that is not the *same* as suggesting that he purposed it.

We can believe in God's providence without seeing every event in this world as an occasion of God's direct action. After all, if Christ teaches us how God relates himself to sin, suffering, evil, and death, he provides us little evidence of anything besides a relentless enmity towards evil. Sin he forgives, suffering he heals, chaos he casts out, and death he defeats. The idea that we would try to impose meaning on the suffering of others then to defend God's character is preposterous, particularly given that Jesus forbid his followers from trying to discern meaning from calamity.⁹⁹ Family, we take heart not in the idea God divinely orchestrates every act, good or evil, but that he overcomes evil with good, and will one day evil forever.

⁹⁸ John Piper. *Coronavirus and Christ*.

⁹⁹ Luke 13:1-5.

Third, Lament gives us the power to look through the brokenness around us and find hope in the goodness of God. I recognize that this sermon included little in the way of direct comfort. Frankly, I don't think now is the time for a message of comfort. We must lament first. And yet, even as we lament, I want to encourage especially my brothers and sisters of color: I can think of no greater comfort than knowing that when I am confronted by loss of a friend and mentor, or generations of rampant racial injustice, or mounting death tolls of a lethal pandemic, I do *not* see the face of God, but his *enemy*.

If there is anything you take away from this sermon, it should be that. Our faith gifts us an understanding that God is the opponent of evil, not its orchestrator. Our faith sets us free from hollow optimism and grants us true hope in its place. And it is that same hope that inspires the Bryan Stevenons of this world to confront systems of injustice and bring glimpses of heaven to the earth. It is the same hope that the Edythe Fords of our community claim when they lace up their shoes and fight the same tired old fights again and again. It is the same hope that our medical professionals cling to every day they strap on their masks and scrubs. It is the same hope I have for Martyn and William, a hope as they grow up in a community and church sensitive to these realities, they will carry within them hearts that are soft to the justice of God. Indeed, it is the same hope we saw in Psalm 130's watchman, longing for that bright sunrise—when God frees Creation from its bondage and completes his triumph over death. On that day, God will raise up creation anew and wipe away all of her tears and ours. Death shall be no more, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, for the former things will have passed away, and Jesus shall declare from his throne, "Behold, I am making all things new."¹⁰⁰

Please pray with me.

Father, we are that wounded toddler: hurt, confused, demanding answers and comfort. Father, we are Peter: once steady, now sinking into the sea of evil that surrounds us. Father, we are the Psalmist: crying out to you from the depths. Would you raise us up, Lord? Would you cast down the Enemy? Remind us that you have already triumphed, and that we share in your triumph. May you cause the sun to rise today, just as it will rise one day forever, shining an eternal and holy light that will warm our weary souls. May your Kingdom come, and may your justice be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.

¹⁰⁰ Revelation 21:1-5.