

DARK CLOUDS



DEEP MERCY

DISCOVERING THE GRACE OF
LAMENT

M A R K
V R O E G O P

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EDITORIAL TEAM, LIFEWAY GROUP BIBLE STUDIES

John Paul Basham
*Director,
Adult Ministry Publishing*

Joel Polk
*Publisher,
Small Group Publishing*

Tyler Quillet
Managing Editor

Cynthia Wooldridge
Content Developer

Reid Patton
Editor

Brett McIntosh
Editor

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Copy Editor

Lauren Ervin
Art Director

Grace Morgan
Graphic Designer

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MARK VROEGOP

Mark Vroegop is the president of The Gospel Coalition. He has a BA from Cedarville University and an MDiv from Cornerstone Seminary. He served in pastoral ministry leadership for nearly thirty years, most recently as the lead pastor of College Park Church in Indianapolis. An award-winning author, Mark has written several books, including *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* and *Waiting Isn't a Waste: The Surprising Comfort of Trusting God in the Uncertainties of Life*. Mark is married to Sarah, and they have three married sons, one daughter, and five grandchildren.

FROM
THE
AUTHOR

Hi friends,

As I've written and spoken about lament over the past eight years, the most common response I hear is, "You just gave me a category for the last few years of my life." That was my experience as well. Discovering the biblical language of lament provided so much grace because I found hope in talking to God about my pain and sorrow.

Once my heart was tuned to this minor-key song, it opened a pathway for talking to God about all kinds of sorrow. I not only came to understand the value of lament; I also realized that life is filled with innumerable occasions for grief.

What's more, I observed the transformation that happens as people explore lament together. There's certainly a place to study lament by yourself. Nothing wrong with that! But my understanding has been amplified as I've listened to others, heard their stories, marveled at their prayers, and cried with them. Grief is common to all of us, and it's helpful to study it together.

I would imagine that some loss in your life has led you to this study. My prayer is that these lessons, discussion questions, and videos will give you a framework and the encouragement you need to explore this important and needed biblical language.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to create this new resource with Lifeway. It's designed with you in mind to help you take one more step in learning to lament.

My prayer is that this study will be helpful to you in your tear-filled pilgrimage. The victory of Christ over death and sorrow is certain. But until then, lament is language for our journey.

Let's walk together!



Scan the code below
for a welcome
message from Mark.



— HOW TO USE —

THIS STUDY



Each of the seven weeks in *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* Bible study follows a repeated rhythm to guide you and is designed with space and journal pages to help you experience and practice the grace of lament.

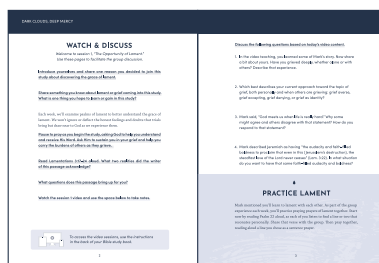
GETTING STARTED

Because learning the grace of lament involves community, I hope you'll do this study with others at your church in a group setting—meeting weekly to watch the video teachings, discuss what you're learning, dig deeper into the text, lament together, and develop friendships that lead you closer to God. You'll find helps for the group meetings in the weekly content as well as the leader guide (pp. 123–141).

Each week begins with an introduction to the theme. Next, you'll find questions for group discussion, Scripture readings, helpful teachings, questions to process what you've read, examples of biblical prayers of lament, and opportunities to interact with God's Word in practicing lament. Each week of Bible study includes group and personal study.

GROUP STUDY

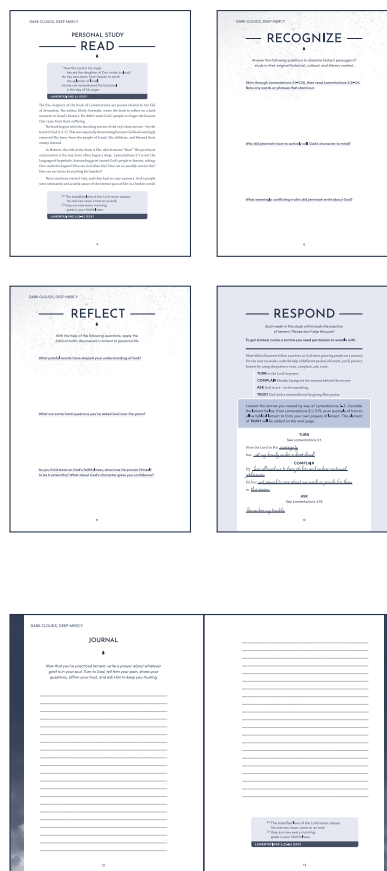
Following the introduction, each week of study includes a guide to facilitate discussion around the previous week's study and the new video teaching. The group session ends with a prompt to help you lament together in Christian community.



*To access the video sessions, use the instructions
in the back of your Bible study book.*

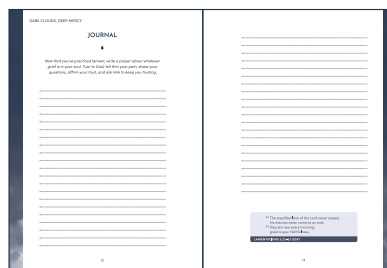
PERSONAL STUDY

The personal study portion of the study contains four sections: Read, Recognize, Reflect, and Respond. These sections are designed by categories, not days, to encourage you to progress each week at your own pace. *Read* the printed Scripture passages and the associated teaching. *Recognize* what the text teaches about lament in its original context. *Reflect* on what the original contexts of biblical lament teach you about lament today. *Respond* by engaging in the biblical pattern of lament, reviewing examples, and personalizing them as your own.



JOURNAL

Two journal pages are provided at the end of each week for you to write a prayer in which you turn to God, tell Him your pain, share your questions, affirm your trust, and ask Him to help you continue trusting Him.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Following the final week in this seven-session study, supplemental helps are provided to give greater context and clarity to the practice of biblical lament. In this section, you will find categories of lament, a list of biblical complaints, truths you can know about God in suffering, and more. These features will help you continue in an ongoing practice of lament after you complete this study.

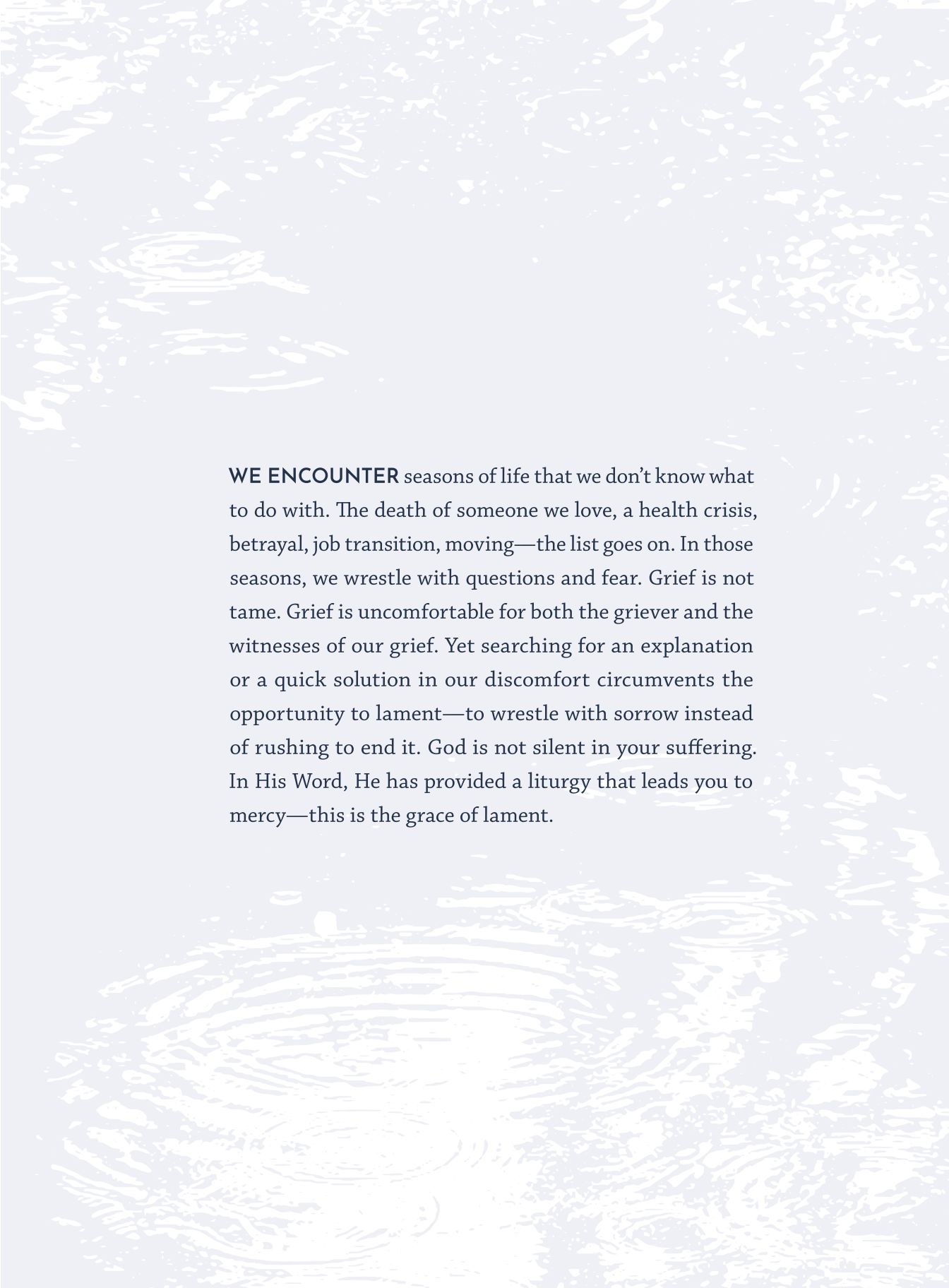
LEADING A GROUP?

On pages 123–141, you'll find a useful guide for additional help facilitating weekly group discussion, including a closing session for those groups who wish to meet at the completion of Week 7.

WEEK 1



The
OPPORTUNITY
of
LAMENT



WE ENCOUNTER seasons of life that we don't know what to do with. The death of someone we love, a health crisis, betrayal, job transition, moving—the list goes on. In those seasons, we wrestle with questions and fear. Grief is not tame. Grief is uncomfortable for both the griever and the witnesses of our grief. Yet searching for an explanation or a quick solution in our discomfort circumvents the opportunity to lament—to wrestle with sorrow instead of rushing to end it. God is not silent in your suffering. In His Word, He has provided a liturgy that leads you to mercy—this is the grace of lament.

WATCH & DISCUSS

*Welcome to Session 1, "The Opportunity of Lament."
Use these pages to facilitate the group discussion.*

Introduce yourselves and share one reason you decided to join this study about discovering the grace of lament.

Share something you know about lament or grief coming into this study. What is one thing you hope to learn or gain through this study?

Each week, we'll examine psalms of lament to better understand the grace of lament. We won't ignore or deflect the honest feelings and doubts trials bring but instead will draw near to God as we experience them.

Pause to pray as you begin this study, asking God to help you understand and receive His Word. Ask Him to sustain you in your grief and help you carry the burdens of others as they grieve.

Read Lamentations 3:17-24 aloud. What two realities did the writer of this passage acknowledge?

What questions does this passage bring up for you?

Watch the Session 1 video. Use the space below to take notes.



To access the video sessions, use the instructions in the back of your Bible study book.

Discuss the following questions based on today's video teaching.

1. Today, you learned some of Mark's story. Now, share a bit of your own story. Have you grieved deeply, either alone or with others? Describe that experience.
2. Which best describes your current approach toward the topic of grief, both personally and when others are grieving: grief-averse, grief-accepting, grief-denying, or grief as identity?
3. Mark said, "God meets us when life is really hard." Why might some agree and others disagree with that statement? How do you respond to that statement?
4. Mark described Jeremiah as having "the audacity and faith-filled boldness to proclaim that even in Jerusalem's destruction, *the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases*" (Lamentations 3:22, ESV). In what situation do you want to have that same faith-filled boldness?



PRACTICE LAMENT

Mark mentioned that in this study, you will learn to lament with each other. As part of the group experience each week, you'll practice praying in lament together. Start now by reading Psalm 22 aloud, and listen for a line or two that resonates with you personally. Share what stood out to you with the group. Then, pray together, reading aloud a line you chose as a sentence prayer.

PERSONAL STUDY

READ



¹ How the Lord in his anger
has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud!
He has cast down from heaven to earth
the splendor of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool
in the day of his anger.

LAMENTATIONS 2:1 (ESV)

The five chapters of the book of Lamentations are poems related to the fall of Jerusalem. The author, likely Jeremiah, wrote the book to reflect on a dark moment in Israel's history. He didn't want God's people to forget the lessons that came from their suffering.

The book begins with the shocking sorrow of the city's destruction—by the hand of God (1:1-5). This was especially devastating because God had seemingly removed His favor from the people of Israel, His children, and blessed their enemy instead.

In Hebrew, the title of the book is *Eka*, which means "How!" This profound exclamation is the way the people of Israel often began a dirge. Lamentations 2:1 is not the language of hyperbole. Astounding grief caused God's people to lament, asking: *How could this happen? How can God allow this? How can we possibly survive this? How can our future be anything but hopeless?*

Their emotions weren't tidy, and they had no easy answers. God's people were intimately and acutely aware of the intense pain of life in a broken world.

²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23 (ESV)

After reading Lamentations 2:1, these verses in chapter three might seem contradictory. They aren't. We live on a sin-cursed earth where dark clouds roll in, often without warning, and God's love and mercy are found even there. Because God is steadfast and eternal, offering Himself in relationship to us new each day, His love and mercy are new as well.

What we, with Jeremiah, might view as paradoxical, then, is central to the opportunity of lament: We can experience God's grace no matter what we face. Lament is a divine liturgy leading you to mercy—and was demonstrated to us by Jesus Himself at the cross.

⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

MATTHEW 27:46 (ESV)

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the
words of my groaning?
² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.
³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
⁴ In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
⁵ To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

PSALM 22:1-5 (ESV)

Matthew doesn't say Jesus used the word *eka* ("How!"), but we can identify the agony He experienced at the cross. In quoting this psalm of lament, Psalm 22, Jesus lets us know He didn't simply *feel like* God had forsaken Him—God had actually forsaken Him. In His dying moments, with the sins of the world past, present, and future heaped upon Him, Jesus was all alone.

Yet. Notice this word David used in Psalm 22 and what follows. In lament, David trusted God and was not put to shame. Even more than David, who was an imperfect man, our sinless Savior was anchored in His soul to who God is and what He has done. If we identify with Jesus in His life, death, and resurrection through repentance and faith, we won't be put to shame either.

RECOGNIZE



Answer the following questions to examine today's passages of study in their original historical, cultural, and literary contexts.

Skim through Lamentations 2:1–3:20, then read Lamentations 3:21–24.

Note any words or phrases that stand out.

Why did Jeremiah have to actively call God's character to mind?

What seemingly conflicting truths did Jeremiah write about God?

Why was it important for Jeremiah to understand God's wrath toward sin in order to comprehend the depth of God's love and mercy?

The paradox of Lamentations 2–3 is that belief in God's mercy, redemption, sovereignty, and love is the foundation of lament. Without hope in God's deliverance and the conviction that He is all-powerful and loving, there would have been no reason for the writer to lament when pain invaded his life. Lament gave voice to his pain as it moved him toward God-centered worship and trust.

What does Jesus's question at the cross teach us about relationship with God?

Why is the cross the ultimate anchor and resolution for our suffering and pain?

REFLECT



Use the following questions to help you apply the biblical truths of lament to your personal life.

What painful events have shaped your understanding of God?

What are some hard questions you've asked God over the years?

As you think back on God's faithfulness, when has He proven Himself to be trustworthy? What about God's character gives you confidence?

How have others responded well to you in times of grief? How have others responded to you poorly?

How do you tend to respond to others who are grieving? In what ways are you already being challenged to respond differently?

What do you hope to learn about God and yourself by engaging in the practice of lament these seven weeks?

Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.
It helps you navigate life between the poles of a hard
life and trusting in God's sovereignty.

RESPOND



Each week in this study will include the practice of lament. Please don't skip this part!

To get started, name a sorrow you need permission to wrestle with.

Most biblical laments follow a pattern as God takes grieving people on a journey. Throughout this study, with the help of different psalms of lament, you'll practice lament by using the pattern: turn, complain, ask, trust.

TURN to the Lord in prayer.

COMPLAIN bluntly, laying out the reasons behind the sorrow.

ASK God to act—to do something.

TRUST God with a renewed heart by giving Him praise.

LAMENT THE SORROW

you named by way of Lamentations 2–3. First, consider this lament, based on Lamentations 2:1; 3:19 (ESV), as an example of how to allow biblical lament to form your own prayers of lament. The element of **TRUST** will be added on the next page.

TURN

See Lamentations 2:1.

How the Lord in His sovereignty has set my family under a dark cloud!

COMPLAIN

He has allowed me to face job loss and endure continued joblessness;

He has not seemed to care about our needs or provide for them in this season.

ASK

See Lamentations 3:19.

Remember my trouble!

PERSONAL LAMENT

Using the Scripture passages and example given, fill in the blanks to write a personal lament about the sorrow you named. Then, let your lament turn to trust, as the lamenter did in Lamentations 3:22–23.

TURN

See Lamentations 2:1.

How the Lord in His _____
has _____ !

COMPLAIN

He has _____
_____;
He has not _____
in _____ .

ASK

See Lamentations 3:19 and pages 116–117.

Remember my _____
_____ !

TRUST

²² The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
²³ they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

LAMENTATIONS 3:22–23 (ESV)

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