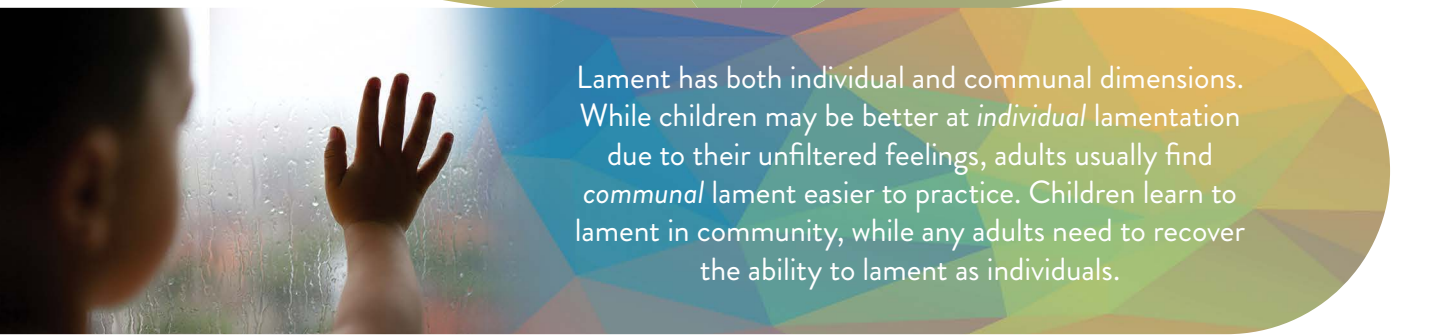


# NAME WOUNDS

PSALM 137:1–6;  
LAMENTATIONS 3:43–48



Lament has both individual and communal dimensions. While children may be better at *individual* lamentation due to their unfiltered feelings, adults usually find *communal* lament easier to practice. Children learn to lament in community, while any adults need to recover the ability to lament as individuals.

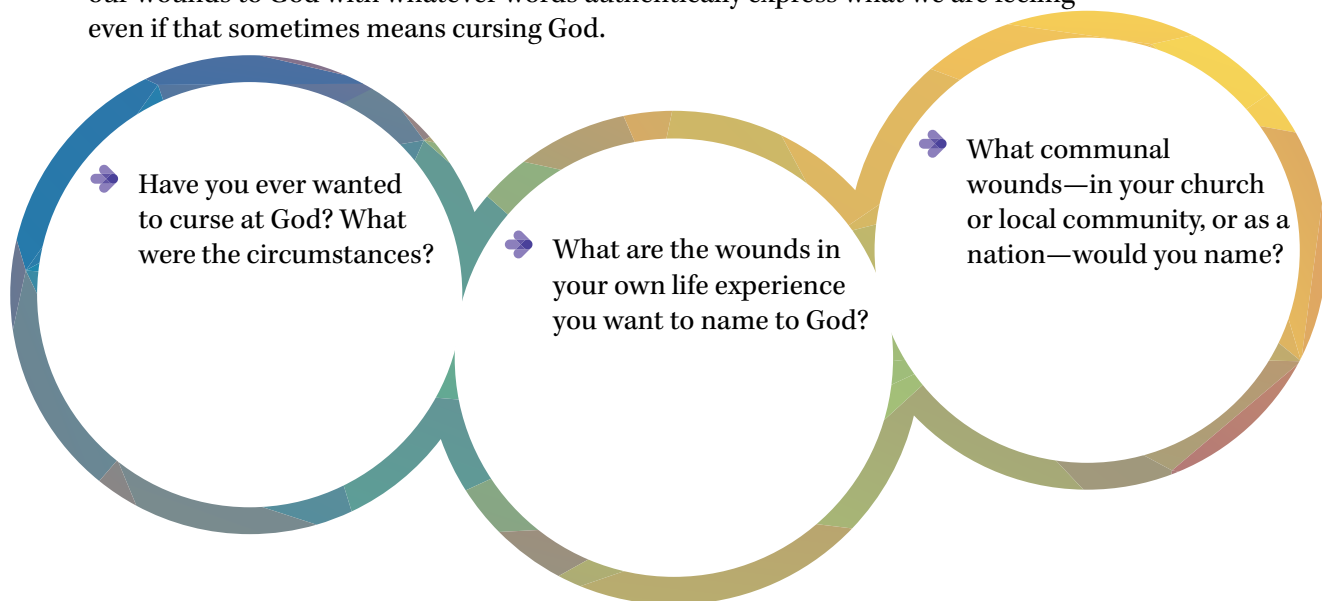
Children are natural lameners. Perhaps they can teach us something about the usefulness of this practice. Not yet socially conditioned to monitor feelings and expressions, they let everyone know when they are in pain. Screaming and crying, they quickly learn to articulate what hurts or who hurt their feelings. It is probably best that we get conditioned to keep some of those outbursts to ourselves. However, for many Americans, the ability to express pain and cry out becomes difficult when we learn to grow *thicker* skin, keep a stiff upper lip, and understand tears as a sign of weakness. It is especially problematic when the church teaches us to ignore wounds and “have a little faith.”

When we come to worship, we are invited to praise God with our whole selves. If we are to do that honestly, it means that some of what we bring to God is our disappointments and hardships. Unfortunately, many Christians don’t feel as free to do this as they should, believing instead that, when they come to church or come before God, they must bring their best, most perfect self. But putting on a fake smile for God does nothing to help us or our relationship with God.

Naming our heartaches heals. We know that an essential aspect of dealing with stress and grief is to name what is stressing us and to be able to identify and name our feelings. This became very clear in recent times with so many things to lament: the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social isolation and loss of lives, police shootings of Black people, economic crisis, increasing climate disasters, to mention a few. Naming our wounds directly to God is an important aspect of lament and opens the way for a

more authentic relationship with God. As we name wounds, we hope that God hears and will respond to our pain.

Our Jewish ancestors in the faith developed a rich tradition of naming wounds in both personal prayers and communal liturgies. If we are to do so faithfully and authentically, the first step is to name what we are feeling without censoring ourselves or seeking to say what we think God wants to hear rather than what we really want to say. Author and social work professor Brené Brown noted, “I’ve spent my entire career sitting across from people, listening to them tell me about the hardest and most painful moments of their lives. After fifteen years of this work, I can confidently say that stories of pain and courage almost always include two things: praying and cussing. Sometimes at the exact same time.”<sup>1</sup> What Brown describes here, at its heart, is lament—naming our wounds to God with whatever words authentically express what we are feeling—even if that sometimes means cursing God.



“In Deepest Night” is a hymn written by Susan Palo Cherwien in 1995. The unexpected and unexplained suicide of a young man in her church was one of the influences that inspired her to write the song. If you would like to hear the song, watch the YouTube video “In Deepest Night, Glory to God Hymn #785, arr. Lee Hoffman” ([bit.ly /FMDeepestNight](https://bit.ly/FMDeepestNight), 2:22). The first verse ends at 0:43. Read the first verse below. The next two sessions contain a verse each. The entire text is in session 4.

In deepest night,  
in darkest days,  
when harps are hung,  
no songs we raise,  
when silence must suffice as praise,  
yet sounding in us quietly  
there is the song of God.<sup>2</sup>

1. Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 24–25.
2. Susan Palo Cherwien, “In Deepest Night,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #785. © 1995 Susan Palo Cherwien (admin. Augsburg Fortress). Used by permission.

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE



Watch the YouTube video “Overview: Lamentations” ([bit.ly/FMLament](https://bit.ly/FMLament), 7:16) for a helpful summary of the biblical practice.

The practice of lament flourished during the exilic period, with most of the lament literature emerging from it. The exilic period refers to the time when the Babylonian Empire took over Israel, and did so with much violence and destruction. Several hundred years before this, Israel had enjoyed a period of stability and prosperity under the reigns of David and Solomon. But it was a small country that was always vulnerable to emerging empires. The times of the biblical prophets were turbulent times, with outside forces often threatening and sometimes succeeding. These periods culminated in the Babylonian exile in 587 BCE.

When this took place, Jews watched their city Jerusalem being destroyed. They beheld the community enslaved, families scattered, and the land rendered desolate. Some were left strangers in their own land, while others were transported to Babylon as captives. The resultant trauma shattered many people’s faith in God. They felt abandoned by the One who promised to be their God. They had none to turn to except God, none to wrestle with except God. This turning to God resulted in the genre and the practice of lament. Psalm 137 is a well-known psalm expressing this abandonment. Imagine hearing and repeating this psalm after the invading Babylonians destroyed your home and deported you and some other survivors to their land, separating you from your community. Notice the feelings of anguish, anger, and revenge.

<sup>1</sup>By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
<sup>2</sup>There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,  
<sup>3</sup>for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, “Sing us one of the songs of  
Zion!”  
<sup>4</sup>How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a foreign land?  
<sup>5</sup>If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand forget its skill.  
<sup>6</sup>May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth  
if I do not remember you,

if I do not consider Jerusalem  
my highest joy.  
<sup>7</sup>Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did  
on the day Jerusalem fell.  
“Tear it down,” they cried,  
“tear it down to its foundations!”  
<sup>8</sup>Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who repays you  
according to what you have done to us.  
<sup>9</sup>Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks.  
—Psalm 137, NIV

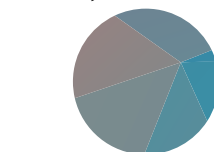
➤ Increasing numbers of refugees in the United States have been forced to leave situations of violence and poverty in their countries. How does the psalm express what they may be feeling?

This and other psalms of lament express the anguish of the community that had been taken captive. Those who were left strangers in their homeland also composed their laments, which is the entire biblical book of Lamentations.

The book of Lamentations gives words to the community's pain in every verse and chapter. Instead of letting go of their pain, forgetting the dead, and rushing to move on, the Jewish survivors chose to name their wounds, remember the trauma, and ritualize it with hope. The author(s) names the community's heartache, acrostically in Hebrew (A to Z in English) in chapters 1–5. In chapter 3, they express their anguish in sets of three verses, naming their feelings again and again. The community continued to lament liturgically year after year (see Jeremiah 41:5; Zechariah 7:3–5). Jews continue to sing this lament liturgically on the ninth of Av, an annual fast when the community remembers and mourns its losses of life, dignity, and religious symbols.

<sup>43</sup>You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us,  
killing without pity;  
<sup>44</sup>you have wrapped yourself with a cloud  
so that no prayer can pass through.  
<sup>45</sup>You have made us filth and rubbish  
among the peoples.  
<sup>46</sup>All our enemies  
have opened their mouths against us;  
<sup>47</sup>panic and pitfall have come upon us,  
devastation and destruction.  
<sup>48</sup>My eyes flow with rivers of tears  
because of the destruction of my people.

—Lamentations 3:43–48

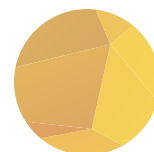
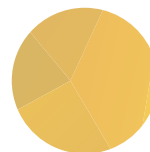
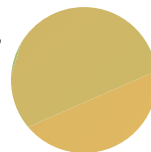


In these six verses from Lamentations, we see this wrestling with God. Direct and specific accusations are hurled against God for killing the people, for refusing to hear their prayers, for reducing the people to “filth and rubbish.” Harsh words for a God who, in their minds, has treated them harshly. Authentic lament is not general or abstract, but specific in its complaints. The complaints raised in the book of Lamentations are specific to what the people experienced with the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem and the ensuing exile.

➤ What groups of people today might resonate with Psalm 137 and Lamentations?

➤ What feelings expressed in these verses might they feel?

➤ What are some specific complaints you have raised to God?



# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

We find laments today in places such as special religious days, worship, and popular culture, particularly in the form of poetry and song. Prayers of confession, prayers of the people, and hymns are just some of the places where wounds are named in worship.

## **JEWISH FESTIVAL OF TISHA B'AV**

*Tisha B'Av* is the annual Jewish day of communal mourning commemorating the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem in 586 BCE and 70 CE. It is a day of intense sadness for people of the Jewish faith. As part of the mourning, sections of the book of Lamentations are read aloud. People may refrain from eating, drinking, and bathing. Watch the YouTube video “What Is Tisha B'Av: The Jewish Day of Mourning” ([bit.ly/FMTishaBav](http://bit.ly/FMTishaBav), 4:10) for a helpful explanation.

## **PRAYERS OF CONFESSION**

In confession we name how we have participated in wounding others, directly or indirectly. We lament the reality of brokenness in personal and common life. While a huge section of the Psalms are psalms of lament, a small subsection of the lament psalms are prayers of confession, naming sinfulness. It is important that we lament before God how broken this world is.

Confession in public worship is tricky. In one congregation there may be persons who confess their participation in an economic system that benefits them alongside others who name the wounds they receive by that very system. Sensitivity for including all present is a challenge for those who lead.

Partly out of response to this concern, a church in New York City organized the time of confession by inviting a member to give a brief, personal confession each week. Planned ahead of worship, the confession time was a mix of hearing individual and corporate laments by people who had hurt someone or participated in unjust systems and also people who lamented their situation due to unjust acts.

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

In many churches, the pastor leads a communal prayer often called the Pastoral Prayer or Prayers of Intercession. The prayer includes concerns for the church, the world, and the community, including individual concerns of congregants. During a time of liturgical renewal, many leaders made this prayer more participatory, and it is often called Prayers of the People. Covering the same themes—praying for the church, world, and community—congregants are invited to name concerns and wounds aloud to the congregation. The recently revised *Book of Common Worship* has changed the name of this part of worship to Prayers of Intercession, which may be led by one person praying on behalf of all or incorporate the congregation in naming wounds.



# PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Again, lament is the outward expression of sorrow and mourning. To deal with lament it is important to name feelings and wounds. Following are some ways to name wounds today.

## WRITE A LAMENT

Use the Lamentations verses below as a model to write an individual or communal lament in your own words. You might focus on either a personal or communal lament and name wounds. Remember, the Bible was written in particular times for particular circumstances. Try to make these verses speak to your current context. Be specific.

You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us,  
killing without pity;  
you have wrapped yourself with a cloud  
so that no prayer can pass through.  
You have made us filth and rubbish  
among the peoples.

All our enemies  
have opened their mouths against us;  
panic and pitfall have come upon us,  
devastation and destruction.

My eyes flow with rivers of tears  
because of the destruction of my people.

—Lamentations 3:43–48



## NAME LAMENTS

Spend some time reflecting on a few things that you lament. Try and list both personal and communal things, such as a broken relationship (personal) and racial tensions or church conflict (communal). In the second column, name wounds; in the third column, name some of your feelings about the lament. Because of the massive loss of life and disruption of most things during the COVID-19 pandemic, include this lament as well.

WHAT YOU LAMENT	NAME WOUNDS	FEELINGS
Time of COVID-19 Pandemic		

## IDENTIFY AND NAME FEELINGS

Use the list of feelings as you think of something you lament currently. Circle feelings you have felt and write a few sentences using them.

### SADNESS

Disappointment  
Loneliness  
Heartbreak  
Lost  
Despair  
Gloom  
Misery  
Shame  
Regret

### ANGER

Disgust  
Frustration  
Rage  
Dislike  
Bitterness  
Spite  
Loathing  
Wrath  
Resentment

### FEAR

Fright  
Hysteria  
Panic  
Shock  
Distress  
Worry  
Nervousness  
Terror  
Uneasiness

## SENTENCES

(Example: I feel nervous and disappointed about the current political and social division in our world.)



# FOLLOWING JESUS

Crawford Brubaker, a Presbyterian minister, self-published a poignant lament, *Alas: A Lament for the United States of America*, in 2020. Modeled after the book of Lamentations, this five-chapter lament names the wounds of American society alphabetically, and gracefully identifies the roots of each wound from within and outside. As our Jewish forebears did, we can tap into this rich tradition of naming wounds both in personal prayers and in our communal liturgies, especially during times of confession.

The *Book of Common Worship* includes a number of prayers of lament. In the section “Service for Justice and Peace” is found a prayer of intercession to be used for a time of controversy or crisis, when people gather to pray for God’s justice and peace. It is to be adapted for the specific circumstance. After a beginning address to God and plea for justice, a time of silence is suggested followed by a selection from the following prompts to be finished by participants aloud or in their hearts. How would you finish these phrases?



We hear of hateful violence and senseless killing . . .  
We feel the suffering, sorrow, and shame of the oppressed . . .  
We fear that justice will again be delayed or denied . . .  
We recognize patterns of privilege  
and systems of discrimination . . .  
We see your creation destroyed by carelessness and greed . . .  
We weep for the victims of . . .  
We grieve in the aftermath of . . .  
We pray for an end to . . .  
We long for a day when . . .  
We learn of the death of N . . .  
We remember the deaths of N., N., and N . . .

The prayer and this session end with a closing prayer:  
Gracious God, keep us working and praying for the day  
when your justice will roll down like waters,  
and your righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.  
Replenish our strength and stir up our hope  
as we look for signs of your coming reign.  
And fill us with the peace that passes understanding—  
the deep peace of Jesus Christ our Savior,  
in whose holy name we pray. **Amen.**<sup>4</sup>

4. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 600–601.

