



HEALING  
OUR  
BROKEN  
HUMANITY

PRACTICES FOR REVITALIZING  
THE CHURCH AND  
RENEWING THE WORLD

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FOREWORD BY WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

InterVarsity Press  
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426  
ivpress.com  
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Cover design: Chris Tobias  
Interior design: Jeanna Wiggins  
Images: geometric paint: © agsandrew / Adobe Stock

ISBN 978-0-8308-4541-5 (print)  
ISBN 978-0-8308-7416-3 (digital)

Printed in the United States of America ☺

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kim, Grace Ji-Sun, 1969- author.

Title: Healing our broken humanity : practices for revitalizing the church and renewing the world / Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Graham Hill.

Description: Downers Grove : InterVarsity Press, 2018. | Includes index. | Identifiers: LCCN 2018014461 (print) | LCCN 2018022329 (ebook) | ISBN 9780830874163 (eBook) | ISBN 9780830845415 (pbk.: alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Church renewal.

Classification: LCC BV600.3 (ebook) | LCC BV600.3 .K555 2018 (print) | DDC 261.8—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018014461>

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P 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2  
Y 35 34 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18

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# RENEW LAMENT

**I**n his book *Mirror to the Church*, Emmanuel Katongole reflects on the Rwandan genocide. Katongole says that Rwanda is a “mirror to the church” that compels the church to embrace a new identity in Christ. Before the Rwandan genocide, the majority of Rwandans were Christians. Yet in 1994, beginning on the Easter weekend, “Christians killed other Christians, often in the same churches where they had worshiped together. The most Christianized country in Africa became the site of its worst genocide.”<sup>1</sup>

Katongole says that Rwanda is an extreme example of what happens when ethnic, tribal, national, or other identities take the place of our identity in Christ. Rwanda is an extreme example, but it’s a mirror to the church. Rwanda mirrors the deep brokenness of the church, the need for repentance, and the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. A new church has emerged after the Rwandan genocide. It’s been slow and difficult, but through grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation this Rwandan church is embracing a new identity in Jesus Christ—not as Hutu or Tutsi but as part of the new humanity in Christ.

Reflecting on the Rwandan genocide, Katongole says, “The resurrection of the church begins with lament.”<sup>2</sup> This is difficult for many Americans and others living in Western countries to grasp. Our culture teaches us to embrace a triumphalistic and success-oriented

posture. Thus we avoid lament. Americans are prone to move quickly to try to fix things, and often we need to lament, mourn, and grieve first to fully experience and understand what has taken place. In cases of injustice and atrocities such as genocide, the only real response we can have at first is to lament. Scripture teaches us that we can't move toward hope, peace, transformation, and reconciliation without going through sorrow, mourning, regret, and lament.

Prayers of lament are central to Scripture and especially the book of Psalms. More than a third of the psalms are laments. Psalm 142 begins,

I cry aloud to the LORD;

I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy.

I pour out before him my complaint;

before him I tell my trouble.

When my spirit grows faint within me,

it is you who watch over my way. (Ps 142:1-3)

These psalms of lament focus on deep regret and sorrow for the sins and travails of a nation and as a cry for God's intervention. The people address these laments to God. They describe the lamentable situation, confess their sin and complicity and sorrow, call God to intervene and to change the situation, and offer thanksgiving and praise to God in trust that God can and will bring change. These psalms provide a model for contemporary lament.

The book of Lamentations is five distinct poetic laments for the destruction of Jerusalem. The book follows a similar pattern to the psalms of lament. Lamentations 1 describes the lamentable, sorrowful, and shameful situation. Lamentations 2 connects the pain and suffering with national sins and God's anger at his proud, idolatrous, and sinful people. This is a prayer of confession and lament. Lamentations 3 speaks of the hope for God's mercy and intervention. Lamentations 4 connects ruin and desolation with corporate sins and abuses. Lamentations 5 is a prayer for mercy that God would bring healing, hope,

and restoration as the people come to God in repentance. Like the psalms of lament, the book of Lamentations provides a model for present-day lament.

Lament is a demonstrative, strong, and corporate expression of deep grief, pain, sorrow, and regret. Lament and repentance deal with issues of the heart. They pave the way for outer change. Lament is a personal and corporate response to many things: evil, sin, death, harm, discrimination, inequality, racism, sexism, colonization, oppression, and injustice. It is about mourning the painful, shameful, or sorrowful situation, about confessing sin and complicity and sorrow, about calling God to intervene and to change the situation. Finally, lament is about offering thanksgiving and praise to God, knowing that God will intervene and bring change, hope, and restoration.

### **WHY DO WE NEED TO LAMENT?**

Lament is about regretting and mourning the past and then moving toward repentance, justice, and new life together. Patricia Huntington states, "We suffer and labor in travail, this is the stuff of lamentation."<sup>3</sup> From there we move toward hope.

Lament is necessary for repentance, healing, wholeness, and hope. It challenges injustice, racism, exploitation, and the status quo. Walter Brueggemann says that when "lament as a form of speech and faith is lost" (as it currently is in North America), the church loses its ability to confront and redress abuses, wrongs, and inequalities. "A theological monopoly is reinforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered, and the outcome in terms of social practice is to reinforce and consolidate the political-economic monopoly of the status quo."<sup>4</sup>

Soong-Chan Rah writes, "The American church avoids lament. The power of lament is minimized and the underlying narrative of suffering that requires lament is lost. . . . The absence of lament in the liturgy of the American church results in the loss of memory. We forget the necessity of lamenting over suffering and pain. We forget

the reality of suffering and pain.”<sup>5</sup> The United States suffers from amnesia. It is time that the United States recovers its memory and laments for our sins.

Lament becomes a crucial practice as we embrace the new humanity in Jesus Christ. We must enter lament and repentance to experience reconciliation, justice, unity, peace, and love.

## WHAT DO WE LAMENT?

We lament the exploitation and destruction of black lives and communities; the abuse of basic human rights; and systemic injustice, expressed in policing, judicial, educational, economic, social, and other systems and structures. We lament the murders of Alton B. Sterling, Philando Castile, the five Dallas police officers, and the numerous black women and men killed in this and previous centuries. We lament the United States’ demons, as Willie James Jennings writes:

Is America willing to be freed from its demons? . . . Racial antagonism structures our imaginations as does our love of weapons. The former creates our enemies, and the latter constructs a false sense of independence and freedom. . . . We have learned to structure our fear geographically and unleash it through police violence set up to protect our spaces. Land developers, civil engineers, city planners, real estate agencies, builders, insurance companies and a whole host of others all profit from our barrier-building and fear-mongering. . . . We have been in a racial cold war for centuries, and now a real war beckons us. . . . The demons tempt us to violence, but there has always been a way to resist that temptation. We must follow the way of a God who will not release us either to our demons or to our despair.<sup>6</sup>

We lament corruption among politicians, police forces, and bankers; military interventions and the militarization of society and

We lament America's treatment of Latinx immigrants and the pain and trauma caused to those who are undocumented. While Christian faith is vibrant among Latinx immigrants, many feel unwelcome, marginalized, and discriminated against. We lament the treatment of Asian immigrants who worked as indentured workers and who died building the railroad. Those who survived never made enough money to go back home.

In Australia we lament our treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the high level of violence against women, the spread of Islamophobia, and our treatment of asylum seekers on the high seas and in offshore detention centers.

We lament when my Muslim friend is called racial slurs and when my Asian American friend is told to "go back to China." We lament when my Asian American dad is called "chink" and "worthless Chinaman" because racism exists and is breeding hate.

We lament the silence of the people of God about many of these things. We lament the complicity of the church in many of these things.

This practice of lament is necessary if we are to experience healing and hope and transformation.

## HOW DO WE LAMENT?

The personal nature of lament is important. But lament is best when it's both individual and corporate.

The psalms of lament and the book of Lamentations provide a model for present-day lament. This model is flexible and adaptable and shouldn't be used rigidly. But it shows us that lament typically has nine elements:

1. *Invocation.* We address our lament to God. "How long, LORD?" (Ps 13:1).
2. *Worship.* We describe who God is (loving, just, merciful, and good) and how God promises to be with us in times of crisis.

“Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises” (Ps 22:3).

3. *Description.* We describe the lamentable, sorrowful, and shameful situation. Complaint about the problem and description of the problem often go together in lament. This is often expressed as questions to God (a) about God’s action or inaction, (b) about our enemies, (c) and/or about our suffering and pain. “Dogs surround me” (Ps 22:16).
4. *Connection.* We connect the lamentable situation and our pain and suffering with individual and corporate sins (such as pride, racism, sexism, idolatry, power seeking, fear-mongering, etc.). “We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence” (Ps 90:7–8).
5. *Repentance.* We express deep sorrow for the sins and travails of our people, and our desire to change. “If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due. Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps 90:11–12).
6. *Confession.* We confess our sin, complicity, sorrow, and desire to repent and change. “We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly” (Ps 106:6).
7. *Petition.* We cry for God’s intervention and mercy, and that God would bring healing, hope, and restoration as we come to God in lament and repentance. “Relent, LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days” (Ps 90:13–14).
8. *Trust.* We express our trust in God because of who God is and in remembrance of God’s past saving and redeeming actions.

We acknowledge that God listens and responds, “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me” (Ps 22:21 NRSV).

9. *Praise*. We offer thanksgiving and praise to God for who God is and what God has done. We offer praise in trust that God can and will bring change. “From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly” (Ps 22:25).

In chapters two and three of *Prophetic Lament*, Soong-Chan Rah makes two important observations about lament. First, the genre of lament is *funeral dirge*. Second, lament provides opportunities for us to hear and respond to the voices of the silenced, marginalized, and suffering. After the murders of Alton B. Sterling, Philando Castile, and five Dallas police officers, Soong-Chan Rah summarized these two observations in this way:

(1) Lamentations deals with a funeral, not a hospital visit (See Lam 1, 2, 4). We cannot pretend that the problem of racism is solved by a hospital visit: a quick prayer and the person will leave the hospital eventually. Our racial history is littered with abused, beaten, murdered dead bodies of black men and women. If you do not acknowledge the long history of dead bodies, you are only playing the game of reconciliation. (2) Lamentations offers the opportunity to hear from all the voices that have suffered. While a prophet/narrator (probably Jeremiah) compiles the laments, it is really the voice of the suffering: women, children, orphans, widows, the sick, the lame and the blind. IT IS NOT the voice of the privileged that is lifted up. Listen and relay the voices of the suffering today. Do not spin the events of this past week to make your own culturally-based application of “personal responsibility” or “law and order.” Lamentations speaks the voice of the suffering not the voice of the privileged.<sup>8</sup>

The practice of lament is crucial for the healing, reconciliation, and transformation of the church.