

## FOREWORD

My family and I moved back to the United States from the Cayman Islands on July 1, 2014. We had just completed eight years of life and ministry in a country with over 110 nationalities living and working together on a strip of land just twenty-two miles by seven miles. Our church included well over thirty nationalities with no supermajority among us. It was the most diverse cultural context in which I'd ever lived and served.

Thirty-eight days after our arrival to the United States, Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri. Our furniture had not arrived from the Cayman Islands, so I sat on the carpeted stairs of our townhome watching news coverage on my iPad. I cannot adequately describe the surge of feelings—plural—that threatened to burst my heart as I watched coverage. There was grief over the death of Brown. There was anger as protesting crowds swelled. There was suspicion and resentment as first the police department and then the prosecutor seemed to bungle things. Changing stories produced confusion. But most of all there was fear for my then-seven-year-old son, born in the Cayman Islands, unschooled in the racial history and rules of the United States, ill-equipped for the inner-city realities he would now grow up in.

Then there came the emails and phone calls from well-intentioned pastor friends. Not to check on me or my son. But to tell me how

wrong I was to have written this or said that. To assure me that “the narrative” I had “fallen for” was not true. To lecture me about respectability. To predict that my son would never face what Mike Brown faced because, well, he was my son.

Things got heated. Then some relationships frayed. Some others, sadly, ended in time.

As I look back on the couple of years that followed, it’s clear to me that part of what was missing in those exchanges was a technology. Specifically, a language, a way of talking together that created doorways between very different experiences in our shared country. The need was evident in the numerous occasions white Christians asked, “How do we talk about these things?” The need was evident in the many occasions black Christians swore off ethnically mixed spaces. The need was evident when Latino/a and Asian brothers and sisters looked on quizzically, at once feeling left out or erased and yet longing to contribute.

We needed what Trekkies call a “universal translator.” I can see the need for a common language clearly *now*, after reading this book. But then, in the heat of the many moments, I interpreted the “how” question in terms of content—what things to say or not say. But the book you hold in your hands has convinced me that the need wasn’t content—there’s plenty of that around—but process. We needed and still need a *way* of talking to each other. That way should encourage us to feel and express that feeling, create empathy, and turn us *together* toward God in faith.

As it turns out, our all-wise and all-loving God has given us in the Bible just such a technology, a way of talking with a built-in procedure and potential to help us express our feelings, empathize with others, turn to God in faith, and, by the Father’s grace, inch toward a deeper experience of reconciliation. That way, that technology, that language is lament. Oh, that we would use this universal translator to commune with each other across our ethnic differences!

Mark Vroegop offers us an opportunity to grow in the practice and the promise of lament. In these pages you find the work of a practitioner. You can tell that, in some measure, Mark, like his Savior, is acquainted with grief. He knows something of the sorrow of others broken by the world's racial cruelties. He's acquainted because he's listened, empathized, turned to God in faith, and attempted real action. He's learned to lament with others.

Accessible. Biblical. Sensitive. Pastoral. Humble. Hopeful.

These are the things that characterize both the pastor-author and this book. In our always-talking world, we now have a book teaching us a different language to calm the clamor and instruct our tongues. It's not a book that attempts to fix everything or pretends its recommendations will be all the reader needs. But it's a start. A very good start. And really, a start at reconciliation is what most of the church needs.

I don't want to endure any more years of strife and turmoil like those following the shooting of Michael Brown. I don't want to lose another friend. I don't want to see the Lord's body split and torn any further by the mistrust and impatience Christians from different ethnic backgrounds sometimes exhibit. I'd far rather lament together. Mark has made me hopeful that lamenting together can help us live together. If you have or want that hope, too, turn the page and dig in.

Thabiti Anyabwile



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book on racial reconciliation authored by a white pastor requires faithful and valiant people behind the scenes. This book would not be possible without a host of people I'd like to thank.

I've dedicated this book to Keith and Yolanda White, two African American church members who consistently model winsome and thoughtful engagement in racial reconciliation at a predominately white church. Their compassion, sacrifice, and perseverance inspire me to follow Jesus more faithfully. I regularly marvel at God's grace in them.

The leadership team of the Diversity Discipleship Discussion Group of College Park Church helped me lead a church-wide conversation about racial harmony. This ethnically diverse group of leaders has patiently answered my questions, provided insightful thoughts, and lovingly offered critiques when I've made mistakes. They created a monthly venue as a base camp for our church's growth in biblical unity. I'm thankful for the way God continues to use them in my life and our church.

The elders of College Park Church not only supported my writing but also navigated the messiness that comes with this topic. Their kind encouragement, eager teachability, and thoughtful questions made exploring this conversation possible.

A group of friends made this manuscript better by offering helpful suggestions and critiques: James Miles III, Dustin Crowe, Dale Shaw,

Jacki Halderman, Debbie Armbruster, Kris Abdnour, Stephen Lopez, Tim Whitney, Christel Taylor, Kenya Turner, Essence Brown, Isaac Adams, Joe Bartemus, and Jay and Marti Justice.

Thabiti Anyabwile models the kind of gracious clarity I hope to emulate in this book. His willingness to write the foreword and contribute an insightful lament not only provided an authoritative voice in racial harmony but, I'm sure, also encouraged other lament writers to add their voices as well.

I'm also grateful for the support of a team of literary professionals. Dave DeWit from Crossway once again leveraged his expertise and experience to make this book better—much better. Austin Wilson, from Wolgemuth and Associates, guided this book from concept to market. Thom Notaro tirelessly edited my manuscript, making my argument clearer.

Books are not written without enormous sacrifices of time. My wife, Sarah, released me to spend hours wrestling with words. She lovingly endured my verbal processing and joyfully embraced the invasion of another book into our family life. On a series of road trips, she patiently read chapters out loud, providing thoughtful insights and suggestions. Her relentless encouragement buoyed my heart through each stage of writing.

Finally, over a hundred people to date have embraced the risk of a pilgrimage called the Civil Rights Vision Trip. I've watched with wonder as transformation emerged through weeping with those who weep. The relationships, lament prayers, and new discoveries created a core group of people committed to pursuing biblical unity in diversity. I've seen reconciliation—one person at a time.

The grace and healing of those trips fueled the vision for this book.

I've witnessed lament open a door. I'm praying the door swings wide open.

## Introduction

# DREAM

### *The Vision of Racial Harmony*

There is no institution more equipped and capable of bringing transformation to the cause of reconciliation than the church.

JOHN PERKINS

“I want the church to look more like heaven.”

How many times have you heard this statement about racial diversity in the church? It’s a beautiful vision—people from all ethnicities worshiping together, loving one another, and living out their unity in Christ.

Imagine a sea of people—as far as your eyes can see—standing in front of Jesus. Everyone clothed with white robes and holding palm branches. Their anthem rolls like a crashing wave as they shout, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” With one voice they offer a glorious tribute to their Savior. Jesus stands alone as the victor. Sin is defeated. Satan is banished, redemption accomplished.

It's a scene from the seventh chapter of Revelation.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9–10)

But what makes this scene compelling is not only the celebration; it's the composition of the crowd.

This is an eternally assembled multitude, the saints from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." A landscape of faces with various hues, beaming as they gaze upon Jesus. Imagine the beautiful tapestry of skin color, the varying shades of ethnicity all assembled in the presence of the King of kings: African, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, European, South American, and Pacific Islander. Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda, white and black Americans, Brahmins and Shudras in India, and white and black South Africans all proclaiming their allegiance to the risen Christ.

Imagine historical divisions and prejudices gone. The pain of partiality and injustice healed. Superiority and pride erased. Standing before the throne of God is a global and diverse multitude rescued by a Jewish carpenter named Jesus. This was God's plan from the beginning. It's why Jesus died.

But shouldn't this unity in Christ be tasted now?

### **Weeping and Harmony**

I've written this book because I'm compelled by the vision of ethnic harmony through the gospel. Racial reconciliation is an essential part of the church's story, and I'm grieved how far we are from it. You probably picked up this book with a similar conviction and sadness. Or perhaps you know things should be different, but you wonder what we can do.



I'd like to invite you to join me in helping the church look more like heaven—right now. And I'm going to suggest a place to start: lament. The biblical language of empathy and exile, perseverance and protest, can open the door for reconciliation. By learning to weep with those who weep we can take steps toward living in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:15–16). As you'll see, lament won't solve all the problems. But it can help.

You might think the church looking more like heaven now seems like a dream—maybe even a fairy tale.

But it happened before.

### **Divided City, United Church**

Followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” in Antioch. The term means “those belonging to Christ.”<sup>1</sup> However, the name that now defines over a third of the world and two billion people was not self-selected. Other people called the disciples of Jesus “Christians.” Have you ever wondered why?

Ethnic harmony was part of the story.

Antioch thrived as a metropolitan city with people from a variety of ethnicities and backgrounds. Like many Roman cities, it was segregated by design. At the establishment of Antioch in 300 BC a wall separated Syrian people from Greek people.<sup>2</sup> As the city grew under Roman domination, eighteen ethnic groups divided its population.<sup>3</sup> As in many cities in the empire, ethnic division and violence were common.<sup>4</sup> Segregation was their solution. Sound familiar?

A thriving church blossomed in Antioch. Historians are not certain who planted this assembly, but it became the launching pad for

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1. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 273.

2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 157.

3. *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, ed. Avraham Negev, 3rd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1990), s.v. “Antioch-on-the-Orontes.”

4. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 158.

the spread of the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth (Matt. 28:18–20). The book of Acts demonstrates the strategic and transformative influence of the church in Antioch. The church experienced an inexplicable unity forged by the gospel.

That’s why a new name—“Christian”—was needed.

## **New People**

The church at Antioch wasn’t Jewish. It wasn’t Gentile. It was both. That was new. Regardless of ethnicity, these believers united around their common belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Unity in the gospel flourished in the church. Culture and ethnicity no longer separated them. Their allegiance to Jesus and love for one another created a countercultural community.

The world had no category for them.

This was only the beginning. Racial unity through the gospel spread beyond Antioch. About three hundred miles away, the church in Colossae received these words from the apostle Paul: “Here [in the church] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). As the gospel impacted the hearts of God’s people, it changed how they related to each other around the world. In the book of Galatians we read, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Spiritual oneness in Christ became the hallmark of the church.

Underneath the most visible demarcations of ethnicity, a more fundamental identity emerged. Jesus brought people together.

Gospel unity created racial harmony.

## **Old Problem**

Sounds incredible, doesn’t it? I think most believers agree that biblical unity is something to pray for and work toward. You probably picked

up this book knowing that reconciliation between a diverse group of people is a beautiful dream.

But is the church marked by a compelling ethnic unity today? Do you know how to make progress toward racial reconciliation?

Unfortunately, the kind of oneness championed in the New Testament and modeled in the early church feels like it's a long way off. If we're honest, we have to admit that the American church is still marked by deep ethnic division.

It's a long, sad story.

I'm sure you've heard that "the most segregated hour in America is 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning." Tragically, the effects of hundreds of years of slavery and the legacy of segregation created canyons of pain and distrust. Additionally, the political, social, and media landscape fossilized our divisions, creating echo chambers of information and opinions. Instead of building bridges toward one another, it feels as if racial fissures are growing wider and deeper—even within the evangelical church. On the whole, churches in America don't look like Antioch.

If we're honest, it's hurt our witness.

Our culture is not marveling at our brotherhood across ethnic fault lines. No one feels the need to create a new name for Christians because of our otherworldly unity. Additionally, most Christians aren't sure what to do about it.

Many of us don't know how to talk about it. We are understandably nervous about discussing racial reconciliation because there are so many land mines. Words must be chosen carefully, and we fear saying the wrong thing. Sometimes we retreat from hard conversations because we don't know what to say. All it takes is a video on Facebook highlighting a racial incident, blunt words from a minority friend, a battle on social media, or a theological discussion on justice, and the fear and division deepen.

What's more, when brothers or sisters are wounded by racial insensitivity or mistreatment, they may not know how to express their

hurt without being misunderstood or marginalized. Perhaps expressing sorrow has resulted in being maligned or accused of playing the “race card.” They might conclude it’s better to bury the pain—again. Without compassion from fellow believers, frustration or bitterness easily takes root.

The chasm between believers widens.

Part of the problem is that our dream of racial harmony is ahead of our language. The evangelical church still hasn’t found its common voice. At least not yet.

What if we could take a step in that direction?

### **A Starting Point**

The aim of this book is to give the church a language that moves Christians of different ethnicities toward reconciliation. In the chapters that follow, I hope you’ll learn to be fluent in lament, the historic prayer language of processing and expressing grief.

I’d like to show you how lament opens a door for racial reconciliation.

Now, I’m not naive to think that learning to lament will fix all the problems connected to racial divisions in the church and in the culture. I merely believe this biblical language is a helpful starting point.

Too often discussions about racial reconciliation tip toward political talking points, or arguments about statistics and history. We tend to become defensive, rehearsing all-too-common narratives from our hurt or experiences. Often the volume and vitriol are elevated. I’d like to strike a different tone, a unifying language amid our differing personal histories, perceptions, and struggles.

I’ve titled this book *Weep with Me* with the hope we can learn to apply Romans 12:15–16: “Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another.” I’ve applied these concepts in my life and my church as we’ve stumbled our way toward greater unity and racial reconciliation. While we have much to learn and a lot of room for growth, I’ve witnessed what happens when Christians start with lament.

Prayers in pain lead to trust—together. Tears, love, and unity replace misunderstanding, distrust, and hurt. We get glimpses of a heavenly unity.

## **A Hopeful Journey**

Learning the language of lament is a journey.

This book is divided into three parts. In part 1 we'll start with a basic definition of terms and learn what the biblical language of lament involves. Then we'll discover the value of spirituals, a musical expression of lament in American culture. And I'll also show you why I think lament opens a door for reconciliation.

Parts 2 and 3 focus on the application of lament. In part 2 we'll learn how lament can help white Christians weep, speak, and repent where needed. In part 3 we'll explore lament for African American and other minority believers as they wrestle with exile, redeem their hurt, and dare to hope again. Finally, we'll conclude by looking at the implications of what we've learned together.

I've chosen three topics for each group. I don't mean to imply that they are not broadly applicable to all believers regardless of ethnicity. Lament is fluid enough and brokenness deep enough for a wide array of expression. However, I think lament is helpful in racial reconciliation as it is applied uniquely in each group's given context, history, or need.

Since I'm writing to a broad array of readers, I quote from a variety of authors who approach racial reconciliation differently. My research uncovered a diversity of perspectives and worldviews. I've cited material I found helpful, but you should not assume that I agree with everything a particular author writes if his or her work is listed in the bibliography. Exploring racial reconciliation requires balance and wisdom to listen to different viewpoints while still charting a biblically faithful path forward.

You'll also see that each chapter concludes with a prayer of lament by a national leader. The prayer contributors graciously agreed to add their unique voices so you can learn from their examples as you read

their laments. The goal is to inspire you to pray your own laments as you ponder their prayers.

By the end of this book I hope you'll know how to start on a path toward racial reconciliation and see glimpses of a heavenly unity in your life and in the church.

## **One Voice**

In the book of Romans deep disagreements based upon culture, backgrounds, and preferences threatened to divide the church. They created an unwelcoming culture among members. Battle lines were drawn. Tribes formed. Emotions ran high. Paul called them to a bigger vision:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Rom. 15:5–7)

Welcoming one another. Living in harmony. Glorifying the Father with one voice. Reflecting the unity of the triune Godhead.

That's the vision: a diverse and united church.

John Perkins, civil rights activist and author of *One Blood*, believes the church is the best place for racial reconciliation. He writes: “There is no institution more equipped and capable of bringing transformation to the cause of reconciliation than the church. But we have some hard work to do.”<sup>5</sup> I think he's right.

Lament is where we can begin.

Christianity looks stunning to the world and most emulates Jesus when our identity and unity in the gospel are more foundational than any other identity—including our ethnicity. Our

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5. John Perkins, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race and Love* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 63.

broken world needs to see this vision lived out in new and fresh ways in the church.

While lament doesn't solve all the problems, it's a place to begin. For the sake of racial reconciliation, I'm inviting you to embrace a bigger, heavenly vision.

Come, weep with me.



### LAMENT PRAYER

O Lord, how long will your church be divided along racial lines? How long will the lingering effects of animosity, injustice, and pride mark your blessed bride? How long, O Lord, will my white brothers and sisters not understand the pain in those whose experience is different than ours? How long, O Lord, will my minority brothers and sisters struggle with distrust and feel ostracized?

God, grant us the heart to weep with those who weep. Give us empathy and understanding. Create trust where there is pain. Make your church the united bride you want her to be.

These divisions of mistrust and historical bias run deep, O God. Without you, nothing will ever change. In our pain and our weariness, we express our hope that Jesus can change our hearts and unite the church. We believe the gospel is greater than our divisions. And we long for the day when the world will take note of how we love each other. So, help us to meet each other in this prayerful journey. We come to learn to lament. Hear us as we weep together, that we might walk together.

In the name of Jesus, our King. Amen.

*Mark Vroegop,*  
lead pastor of College Park Church,  
Indianapolis, Indiana

### **Discussion Questions**

1. If you were to ask an unbeliever in your city what he or she thinks about race relations in “the church,” what words do you think that person would use? Why would he or she select those words?
2. Describe the kind of church experience you had growing up as it relates to racial reconciliation. If you were not raised in church, describe the culture in your family or city when it came to ethnicity.
3. What fears do you have as you read this book? What makes you nervous?
4. How familiar are you with the biblical category of lament? What do you think it means to lament?
5. Why is it important for the church to work toward racial reconciliation? What happens if this is neglected?
6. List three to five prayer requests for yourself and your church as you enter this journey.



PART 1



LAMENT IN THE  
BIBLE AND HISTORY



## PRAY

*The Language of Lament*

Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord,  
Standin' in the need of prayer. . . .  
It's me, it's me, O Lord,  
Standin' in the need of prayer.

AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

My journey in reconciliation started with tears in an African American pastor's office.

A providential meeting nearly thirty years ago changed me.

After college I worked as an admissions counselor for a Christian university. My responsibilities included meeting with inner-city African American pastors with hopes of their high school students applying to our college. Unfortunately, the student body of this conservative, historically Baptist college wasn't multiethnic. Not even close.

However, the university implemented some important steps. I was part of the team trying to recruit Christian students from other

ethnicities. I scheduled an introductory meeting with a leading African American pastor. Our diversity director joined me.

The pastor sat behind an impressive oak desk and was dressed in a perfectly tailored suit with a face radiating strength and grace. His warm, booming voice commanded respect.

After explaining the purpose of our visit, I asked him why more of his students didn't apply to our Christian university. My naivete was surely obvious. He was gracious.

The pastor explained the barriers his kids faced: the challenges of inner-city life, educational disparities, and generational poverty. He told me the issue was not as simple as I assumed—there were problems that made it extremely difficult for his kids to consider applying, let alone enrolling in our college. He said, “My kids simply do not have the same opportunities as the students who attend your university.”

The argument was not new to me. But I had never heard it directly from someone who expressed it so clearly.

### **My Dutch Heritage**

Before I explain what happened next, you need to know about my family background. My paternal grandparents and father were born in the Netherlands. After World War II, the Vroegops immigrated to the United States with five children. A farmer on the East Coast paid their passage in return for several years of service.

After paying their debts, my grandparents and father settled in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Family connections and a network of Dutch-speaking friends helped them navigate a new country. My grandfather worked for anyone who would employ him, including a garbage company for a while. It's an amazing story, the American dream.

Sadly, my grandfather died fifteen months before I was born. While I didn't have the privilege of a relationship with him, a particular worldview was part of my inheritance. Here's the narrative: The United States is a land of opportunity. If you are disciplined, work hard, stay

married, and live frugally, the United States is full of opportunities. I don't remember being taught this cultural script. But this Dutch worldview was foundational.

### **A Tear-Filled Awakening**

Back to the pastor's office.

His statement, "My kids simply do not have the same opportunities as the students who attend your university" struck a nerve. I pushed back with an oft rehearsed narrative: "Pastor, with all due respect, I don't understand why you would say kids in your church lack opportunity. This nation is filled with opportunities." I recounted the story of my grandfather.

The pastor paused. I actually thought I had convinced him. This narrative, after all, was inarguable. But my perspective was about to be challenged.

I didn't see it coming.

He leaned toward me, speaking graciously and slowly. It seemed like he'd had this conversation before. "I'm sure your grandfather worked hard. But here's the thing: your grandfather was able to get a job in the 1940s. The color of his skin didn't create any barriers. Do you think my black grandfather could have been hired for the same job as your white grandfather in the 1940s?" He paused, waiting for my answer.

My mind quickly ran through the history of my hometown. I knew the division. I heard the jokes. I knew the mantra "If you're not Dutch, you're not much."

The answer was obvious.

"No, sir, he would not," I quietly replied.

The pastor now made his point clear: "Mark, think of the difference that made. Ask yourself how much of your life is connected to the simple fact that your grandfather came to the United States as a white man."

Suddenly, I saw the world through a different lens. It grieved me. Why didn't I see it before?

That's when the tears started.

Overcome with surprising sorrow, I sat in the chair quietly weeping. I was ashamed of my arrogance, and overwhelmed with the pain I saw in the pastor's eyes. Stunned by the implications of what I heard, I couldn't speak.

My reaction startled my colleague from the university. She asked, "Pastor, what's happening right now?"

He said, "Sister, our brother has just seen something he's never seen before."

He was right.

While laws and cultural norms had changed since the 1940s, I never fully considered the present implications of the past, or the existing hurdles and barriers that minorities might face. My family story made it easy for me to ignore the experiences of others. I had never engaged—face-to-face—with someone struggling with a different context than mine. To be clear: I wasn't wrestling with "white guilt." My eyes were opened to the narrowness of my cultural narrative, but also to my lack of compassion. That's what hit me. And it grieved me—deeply.

I left with a changed heart. The meeting in the pastor's office became a defining moment. My first lament about race came unexpectedly. It felt like a conversion.

It was the beginning of a lifelong journey.

### **Discovering Lament**

My first book, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*, explores the nuances of lament in the Psalms and Lamentations for walking through grief. In God's providence, writing about lament and a movement of diversity in our church ran on parallel paths. What began as a small group of minority leaders talking with our pastors

about racial reconciliation blossomed into a shift in the composition and culture of our mostly white church in the suburbs of Indianapolis. Our church, like every church, is far from perfect. It's been messy. But we've seen God move.

This book, *Weep with Me*, developed as I observed unique applications of lament to racial reconciliation. I've witnessed not only how lament serves people wrestling with loss but also how it gives people a language for talking to God and to one another about the pain and sorrow hindering racial reconciliation.

I became convinced that lament, as a biblical prayer language, can open a door for reconciliation. When Christians from majority and minority cultures learn to grieve together, they reaffirm their common bond as brothers and sisters in Christ. Lament enters into the deep emotions of sorrow, hurt, misunderstanding, and injustice.

When it comes to racial reconciliation, I think we should approach the conversation as we would if a dear friend experienced a deep loss. Our first step should be to sit beside the grieving individual. Love the person. Listen. And lament with him or her. Bryan Loritts offers this helpful advice:

The way forward is not an appeal to the facts as a first resort. Rather, we should attempt to get inside each other's skin as best as we can to feel what they feel and understand it. . . . Basically, there are five levels of communication: 1. Cliché; 2. Facts; 3. Opinion; 4. Feelings; 5. Transparency, with "cliché" representing the shallowest form of communication and "transparency" the deepest. I will never know what it's like to be a woman, but I do know that when my wife comes at me with level four (feelings), and I stay in lawyer-land at level two, this never is a recipe for intimacy. I am not denying facts, but I've had to learn the hard way that if I am to experience oneness with my bride, I must drop down to level four in an attempt to understand before I resurface to level two. Facts are a first and last resort in a court of law, but

when it comes to human relationships, let us first stop and feel before we go to facts.<sup>1</sup>

Lament starts with a humble posture. It communicates: “I’m here. I’m sad too. Let’s talk to Jesus, because we need his help.”

Lament is not the only step. Developing relationships, honest conversations, discussions about perceptions, and working for change must also be part of the reconciliation process. As I learned in the pastor’s office, society at large can create barriers that still negatively affect our culture, relationship networks, and opportunities. There’s much work to do. Lament isn’t a simplistic solution.

But I’ve seen how it helps.

## **Definitions**

Before we explore lament and racial reconciliation, we need to define a few terms. Clarifying the meaning of words will help us avoid confusion.

I’m a white Christian pastor with a Dutch heritage. I’m writing to people who share the same skin color as mine and to those who don’t. I hope to apply lament to both groups. But what do we call these two categories of readers? We don’t have descriptions that apply well in every context. At the same time, we need to know whom I’m writing to or about.

### *Majority and Minority Cultures*

For the purposes of this book I will use *majority culture* to refer to those of us who are white. I will use the term *minority culture* as a category for African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and other people groups who have historically not been a part of “the majority” in the United States. I realize that the majority/

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1. Ed Stetzer, “It’s Time to Listen: Feeling the Pain Despite the Facts, a Guest Post by Bryan Loritts,” *Christianity Today*, August 20, 2014, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/august/its-time-to-listen.html>.



minority distinction may not be statistically accurate in certain parts of the country. Further, they will not likely be useful terms in the future as demographics change. I'm using the distinction merely in its historical context while acknowledging the limitations of the terms.

Throughout this book I will refer to minorities with a particular application to African American or black Christians. I don't intend to exclude other minority groups. I'm merely attempting to apply lament to the most prominent historical division—between white and black Christians. I know there are other challenges. I hope that by focusing on the white-black reconciliation issue, other applications will follow.

### *Race*

The term *race* is also important to define. First, we need to acknowledge that the Bible talks about one race—the human race. Every man or woman reflects the same image of God (Gen. 1:26). When the Bible distinguishes between people, it is on the basis of ethnicity: “tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). I prefer the term *ethnicity* because it's closer to the biblical text and it connects people to their geographic and cultural origins.

However, the term *race* is more commonly used in our culture. We need to understand the background of this term. Race, in American history, is a social construct. In other words, our society created the term and defined it. Race deconstructed ethnicity (European, African, Asian, etc.) into two categories merely related to the color of one's skin: white and black (“colored”). White became an all-encompassing category based on the color of one's skin—not ethnicity. What's more, the creation of the term was associated with superiority and white supremacy.

Tragically, the roots of race can be traced back to the grievous sin of slavery. Daniel Hill explains:

The horror of slavery was a major moral crisis for America, but instead of acknowledging the sin of that enterprise, we went in the opposite direction. We began to deemphasize the differences within various European ethnicities and began to describe white people as a human collective that was inherently superior to people of color.<sup>2</sup>

### *Racism*

What about *racism*? This word takes the definition of *race* and systematizes the ideology of superiority/inferiority in language, laws, and culture. Racism treats people unfairly based upon the belief of their inferiority. Prejudice is different. It's the negative beliefs and attitudes toward a person based upon his or her association with a group. It's painting broadly with a negative bias. Racism uses skin color for sinful partiality (see James 2:1–13). And in racist cultures, it combines superiority and power into a repressive system.

Let me give you an example. If you traced the immigration patterns of the Irish to America, you would learn that in their early years Irish immigrants were treated as inferior to other European ethnic groups. Because of their suffering, the Irish formed a unique bond with African Americans. In fact, in the census of 1850, the term *mulatto* was introduced for the first time, in part because of children who were of Irish and African American descent.

Irish immigration overlapped with the development of the social construct of race in the nineteenth century. The Irish lived in the same neighborhoods and competed for the same jobs as blacks. Since the Irish wanted to be accepted as white, they eventually embraced racism against African Americans. In essence, the Irish became white. Their ethnicity was eclipsed by race. The racism within the culture of the United States allowed them to do this.<sup>3</sup> And they were not alone.

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2. Daniel Hill, *White Awake: An Honest Look at What It Means to Be White* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 51.

3. Hill, *White Awake*, 51–52.

These definitions are loaded, aren't they? You probably feel the tension. You may have some questions. However, remember that the church is a great place for racial reconciliation because we have an identity underneath the most painful categories in our culture. In Christ we find the resources to have this conversation since our identity in the gospel undergirds and informs our history, ethnicity, and culture—even our “race.”

With that in mind, let's learn about lament to see how vital it is for racial reconciliation.

### **Defining *Lament***

Simply stated, a lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust. Laments are more than merely the expression of sorrow. The goal of a lament is to recommit oneself to hoping in God, believing his promises, and a godly response to pain, suffering, and injustice.

Lament is the historic biblical prayer language of Christians in pain. It's the voice of God's people while living in a broken world. Laments acknowledge the reality of pain while trusting in God's promises.

Over a third of the Psalms are laments. They talk to God about the paradox of God's promises and the presence of pain. Sometimes the lament is personal. At other times it is a prayer for an entire group. Sometimes lament prayers reflect repentance. And some psalms of lament express sorrow and frustration over injustice.

The breadth of situations in which laments are prayed make it uniquely helpful.

The book of Lamentations laments the destruction of Jerusalem as people cling to hope in God. The prophet Jeremiah refused to allow his heart to crumble when he looked at the rubble of the city.

The thought of my suffering and homelessness  
is bitter beyond words.

I will never forget this awful time,  
as I grieve over my loss.  
Yet I still dare to hope  
when I remember this:

The faithful love of the LORD never ends!  
His mercies never cease. (Lam. 3:19–22 NLT)

Lament enters the complicated space of deep disappointment and lingering hurt. It boldly reaffirms the trustworthiness of God.

### **Basics of Lament**

Now that you understand the concept, we need to learn how to lament. Let me briefly highlight four elements.

#### *Turn to God*

Laments talk to God about pain.<sup>4</sup> Confusion, exhaustion, and disappointment can cause us to retreat from the one who knows our sorrows. The poisonous mist of bitterness or anger can sweep in, creating a fog of unbelief or a justification for ungodly behavior.

Lament talks to God even if it's messy. This requires faith. Silence is easier but unhealthy. Lament prays through hardship. Consider the gut-level honesty of Psalm 77:

I cry aloud to God,  
aloud to God, and he will hear me.  
In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;  
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;  
my soul refuses to be comforted.  
When I remember God, I moan;  
when I meditate, my spirit faints. (vv. 1–3)

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4. This and the following three points draw upon my article "How Lament Is a Path to Praise," Crosswalk, March 25, 2019, <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/how-lament-is-a-path-to-praise.html>. See also Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

Even though hope feels distant, lamenters reach out to God. This historic prayer language invites us to keep crying out in prayer.

### *Complain*

The second step in lament candidly talks to God about what is wrong. Biblical complaint vocalizes circumstances that do not seem to fit with God's character or his purposes. While the psalmist knows God is in control, there are times when it feels like he's not. When it seems that injustice rules the day, lament invites us to talk to God about it. Instead of stuffing our struggles, lament gives us permission to verbalize the tension. Psalm 13 wrestles with why God isn't doing more:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I take counsel in my soul  
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (vv. 1–2)

Biblical complaining is not venting your sinful anger. It's merely telling God about your struggles. And the more honest we can be, the sooner we are able to move to the next element.

### *Ask*

Lament seeks more than relief; it yearns for the deliverance that fits with God's character. Godly lamenters keep asking even when the answer is delayed.

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;  
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,  
lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"  
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. (Ps. 13:3–4)

Lament affirms the applicability of God's promises by asking again and again for divine help. Repeated requests become hopeful reminders of

what God can do. Asking boldly serves to strengthen our resolve to not give up. But it also encourages us to embrace the destination of all lament: a renewal of trust.

### *Trust*

Confidence in God's trustworthiness is the destination of all laments. Turning, complaining, and asking lead here. Laments help us through suffering by directing our hearts to make the choice—often daily—to trust in God's purposes hidden behind the pain. In this way, a lament is one of the most theologically informed practices of the Christian life.

Laments lead us through our sorrows so that we can trust God and praise him. This is how Psalm 13 concludes. Notice the pivot on the word "but" and the direct decision to trust, rejoice, and sing:

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (vv. 5–6)

It's a powerful ending to a blunt and honest psalm. Every lament is designed to become this kind of pathway toward hopeful godliness.

These four elements (turning, complaining, asking, and trusting) serve as the basic ingredients of lament. Since biblical laments are poems set to music, they don't always include every element. But this framework provides the structure for talking to God and praying together about the brokenness of the world.

When it comes to the historic scar of racism and a lack of reconciliation, lament can be a helpful language to learn.

### **A Common Language**

In racial reconciliation, a common language unites people. When the hip-hop artist Jay-Z was interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, he made a stunning statement:

Hip-hop has done more for racial relations than most cultural icons. . . .

This music didn't only influence kids from urban areas, it influenced people all around the world. . . .

If you look at clubs and how integrated they have become—before people partied in separate clubs. There were hip-hop clubs and there were techno clubs. And now people party together and once you have people partying, dancing, and singing along to the same music, then conversations naturally happen after that. And within conversations, we all realize that we're more alike than we are separate.<sup>5</sup>

From a secular standpoint, I think Jay-Z is right. Hip-hop created a language that opens doors between people of different ethnicities. And when that happens, reconciliation is more likely.

Biblical lament does the same thing.

### **Where Lament Fits**

Racial reconciliation is a process. Lament can be redemptive. I have found it helpful to think about lament in the context of a fivefold path: love, listen, lament, learn, and leverage. Let me explain each of these steps.

#### *Love*

The church should be involved in racial reconciliation because of what we believe. Our common relationship with Jesus, regardless of our ethnicity, creates a new spiritual identity. We are part of the same family. We bear God's image. We love the same Savior. This is more foundational than any cultural or racial category—"Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11; see also 3:14–17). Racial reconciliation flows from this Christ-centered identity. Christians start with love because of the gospel.

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5. Eric Mason, "How Should the Church Engage?," in *The Gospel and Racial Reconciliation*, ed. Russell Moore and Andrew T. Walker (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 53–54.

*Listen*

The second step relates to James 1:19: “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” James attempted to help a church navigate ongoing conflicts and live spiritually mature lives. I’m sure you’ll agree with me that this biblical principle applies in many areas. It has unique applications to discussions about racial tension and ethnic reconciliation. Too often the tone of the conversation is marked by closed minds, hasty words, and angry attitudes. However, if we can commit to a posture of listening without speaking quickly or getting angry, irritated, or frustrated, there’s hope for progress.

*Lament*

We’ve already started learning about lament, and the rest of this book explores this critical step, so I won’t spend much time here. Suffice it to say that lament helps us by giving us steps toward future progress. It supplies a biblical voice that allows us to talk to God and one another about the pain we feel and see. As you’ll see in the chapters to come, it opens a door for reconciliation.

*Learn*

The fourth step is a commitment to learn from one another. Our cultural backgrounds, understandings of history, and experiences create assumptions and blind spots. If we take the posture of learning from one another, we create a safe environment for asking questions and working through disagreements. But we also discover new concepts or even historical realities we didn’t fully understand. As I’ve entered into the pursuit of racial reconciliation, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve said: “I had no idea. Why didn’t I know this?” We are able to grow by learning from one another, allowing the diversity of experience and perspectives to make us wiser and more mature.



### *Leverage*

The final step involves action and change. The goal of racial reconciliation is not merely to pray about what's wrong or to express our empathy. Our minority brothers and sisters grow weary of efforts that stop here. The vision for this book is for these steps, including lament, to bring change—in our hearts, our churches, and our culture. Depending on your context, you'll have to determine what that looks like. It could include creating new relationships, speaking up when racially insensitive comments are made, practicing intentional hospitality, talking with your church leadership about reconciliation, or reading a wider array of books. You might find ways to increase the ethnic diversity around your dinner table, at your workplace, or in your church. If you're a minority, it might look like practicing a heart of love and kindness toward hurtful people or choosing to share your pain from racial insensitivity or injustice. I'll provide other examples in the chapters that follow. The key is to understand that racial reconciliation requires action. Love, listening, lamenting, and learning are designed to lead us here.

This fivefold model gives us a framework to consider how to pursue ethnic harmony. Lament can be a vital part of the reconciliation process. The gospel is more foundational than our most painful historical categories. "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11). Lament prayerfully reinforces this Christ-centered identity. It's the voice of humility and empathy.

It opens a door for reconciliation.

My conversation with the African American pastor was the beginning of a journey. A lot of learning, conversations, tears, and mistakes happened along the way. But God used that brief conversation to begin something in me. Lament was an important part of the process.

I hope you'll join me in this journey.



## LAMENT PRAYER

How long, O Lord, will you leave us in our blindness? Won't you open our eyes and our hearts to each other? The minds of your people are not renewed as they ought to be. We cling to American cultural patterns and myths that ignore or deny the painful stories of others. We remain ignorant of the ways race and color have opened opportunity for some while closing it for others. We choose to reject the knowledge of these histories and injustices so that we might protect our own fragile identities and self-regard. We refuse to acknowledge the prejudice, bigotry, racism, and oppression that is obviously behind and before us. How long, O Lord, will you leave us in blindness?

Father in heaven, enlighten the eyes of our understanding. Your church fails at times to live together in love and empathy. We fail to enter one another's shoes. We prefer the self-fulfilling prophecies of national narratives, the privilege of our protective cultures, the comfort of our cultural companions, the power of our political tribes. We count the risk of loving "others" too costly a gamble to make. How long, O Lord, before we practice the human and humanizing spiritual disciplines of sitting with and listening to each other?

O Lord, the pain of our many rejections, the wounds of our many withdrawals, the isolation of our many suspicions have weakened our unity, our witness, and our love. But you love us, and you have promised to finish the work you began in us. You have predestined us to be conformed to the image of your Son. Grant that the same love with which Christ loved us might be shared abundantly between Christians of every hue, history, culture, class, and language. O great God our Father, fill your household with Christ's redemptive love!

*Thabiti Anyabwile,*  
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### **Discussion Questions**

1. When it comes to discussing the topic of race, what are the immediate fears, concerns, or questions you have?
2. What is your ethnic and cultural background, and how did it shape your understanding of the world?
3. Review the definition of lament and the four elements. What makes sense to you about lament? What is unclear?
4. Without knowing the rest of the book, how can you imagine lament helping in the conversation about racial reconciliation?
5. Review the five steps of reconciliation (love, listen, lament, learn, and leverage). Which is the hardest for you to understand and apply? What steps can you take to grow?
6. Using a lament psalm (see appendix 1), see if you can identify the four elements.
7. Write your own lament about any kind of pain or suffering in your life. Then write a lament about the subject of race and ethnic divisions.