

### SONGS FOR THE SUFFERING

#### ABOUT THE DEVOTIONAL

Suffering can strike out of nowhere, leaving us reeling in a sea of emotions, shock, and even despair. It has a way of challenging everything we know about God and his goodness. But in your darkest moments of pain and confusion, you are not alone—you never are.

Songs for the Suffering is a six week study in which Julia Allspaw leads readers through the scary emotions that come with profound suffering—even the emotions we don't want to admit. This study is a safe place to land for women who find themselves questioning the goodness of God—or even his existence. Julia mines the depth of the Scriptures to offer up real hope when "everything happens for a reason" just doesn't cut it. While the Bible may feel like the last place you want to bring your pain, Songs for the Suffering seeks to show us just how much of a safe haven the Word of God is for those struggling in seasons of darkness.

## SONGS FOR <u>The</u> Suffering

Cirk in

Julia Allspaw

Songs for the Suffering

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### For my boys:

Jacob, my husband, you never let go of my hand as I walked through the darkness. It is because of you I made it to the other side. You are my life's greatest gift.

And to Leon, my son, your life brought me hope when I needed it the most and taught me how to believe again. It was always supposed to be you.

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# INTRODUCTION

Songs for the Suffering



### INTRODUCTION

Dear Friends,

I am happy—and sad—that you are here.

Let me explain.

If you are here, opening the pages of this book, it means that like me, you have suffered. You may be on the road of pain at this very moment, or you may have lived here for years. This may be the tenth book you've read on the topic of suffering or your very first. You, my friend, have landed here



because the cards life has dealt you have been filled with pain and tear-filled nights, doubting and questioning, and wondering if the God you call Savior was ever real to begin with. You are singing in the loud chorus of the songs of the suffering. I am so sad you're here.

But, I am also happy—happy that your pain has overlapped with mine and that we can call ourselves sisters on this road toward hope. And really, that's what this book is all about: learning to hope again. I write to you from my own heavy heart, my own legs tired of walking through the pain for far too long. I write to you from a life that has also been marked by suffering; and if there is anything that brings me hope again, it is that you and I can walk this newfound path together. We can join in this chorus as one voice, and maybe, just maybe, learn to hope again.

Throughout my story, I have been drawn back to that verse in Romans 8, the one we hang on walls and paint on canvases: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28). When I first received my diagnosis of chronic migraines, I thought of this verse, and my heart boiled with anger at the God I had called the giver of goodness.

Good? What good is this? What good is he doing for me? How could any of this be truly good?

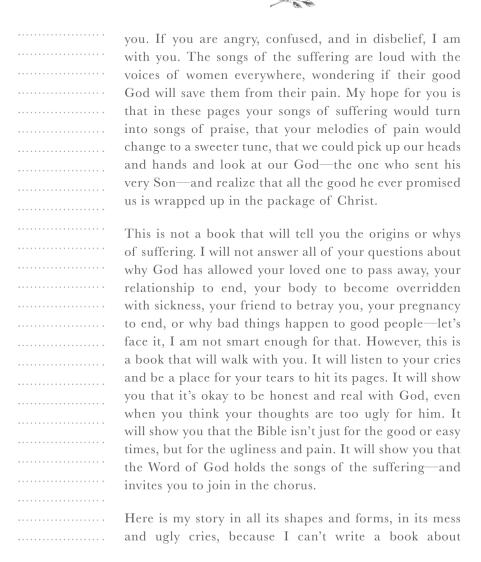


Right before Romans 8:28 is a long and nearly depressing chunk of Scripture about the suffering of this world. It is here that Paul tells us that the whole world is groaning for redemption, groaning to be saved from brokenness and pain. Verse 23 says, "We ourselves groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). My songs of suffering have often sounded like groans too unbearable to speak in the daylight or in front of friends at a coffee shop. Paul reminds us here that it is not just we who are groaning, it is all of creation. And really, what are we groaning for? It's not just for a happy life.

We groan for the redemption of our bodies, for adoption as sons. We groan for heaven and for salvation. When I fall into the trap of believing, "If I just didn't have these circumstances, then God would be good again," I remind myself that Jesus is the *good*—he is the answer to our groaning, the water to quench our forever thirst, the Bread of Life. I remind myself that because I have him, I already have the goodness he promised me, even in the midst of circumstances that feel far from it. I have Jesus, the King, inside of me, preparing for me an eternal home more glorious than any good I could possibly be given on this earth. It is here that I find my goodness; it is in salvation that I find my hope.

If you are in that place, wondering how God could ever be good, hurling those same questions at God, I am with

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suffering without first letting you in. We sufferers know that any pain, while different, is often marked with the same questions: *How can God be good all the time when my life looks like this? How do I trust in a creator who has willingly allowed me such pain? How do I talk to a God when it feels like he isn't even there?* I share my story with you because I, too, have asked those questions. I have wondered those painful thoughts in the quiet of my sleep, and I firmly believe that in order to change, you must first be honest. While our pain may not be the same and while our roads may have had different turns and destinations, my prayer is that somewhere in these words of mine you find yourself—and then again, you find your Father.

Dear Friend, I am so happy you're here.

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# MY STORY



### MY STORY

In March of 2019, I traveled to Rochester, Minnesota to see some of the most talented and distinguished doctors in the headache community. At age twelve I was diagnosed with chronic migraines, and nearly twelve years later, as my pain and condition worsened, doctors at Mayo Clinic agreed to take my case and investigate the girl who seemed to always be in pain. After a week of tests and visits, conversations and potential pitches, a sweet doctor with a thick Russian accent and a full, dark beard held my hands and told me there was nothing he could do for me. It was that week I was told my diagnosis is a forever one; one I should get used to; one I should begin to accept, rather than waiting around for change. That week my



hope began to slowly diminish. Like a roaring fire being put out by a bucket of water, my light had gone out. I feel like I cried so much that week, and yet I could have kept crying and mourning the loss of a healthy body this side of heaven. There were a few weeks after my diagnosis when I truly believed God may not be real—or if he was real, he was only real to others. But suddenly—and at the same time, slowly—Job picked me up. The Psalms sprang forth with new life. I found peace and steadiness in my suffering. I have now become content with this broken body of mine. I have felt God's presence amidst this ugly pain, and I have asked God to help me find a new way of life in its midst.

But then the miscarriage happened, and I began to feel as if God had forgotten about me all over again. I clung to the words repeated in the Psalms: "Remember me, O Lord!" I longed for him to simply remember my name. And yet, even in the midst of another dream crushed, the Lord continually restored my place with him. I was filled with confusion and defeat, but I also felt, in a strange sense, that his very hands lay on my skin. It was as if the world was hurling shots at me and his arms and hands and fingers made sure I was only scratched—not punctured to the core.

A few months later, when I was just beginning to feel like I could walk again, the call from my mom came. I asked the question I knew I shouldn't have asked, knowing 8 A

that her tumor markers indicated that the hidden villain inside of her was back. I asked the question, "Do you think it's cancer?" only to hear the inevitable news on the other line: "Yes, I do."

After nearly a year of pain, diagnoses, miscarriage, and cancer, the God I had known since I was thirteen began to feel like a stranger—or even worse, like a man I knew, but one with whom I no longer wanted to identify. I wondered, *How can I believe in a God of life when it feels like everything around me is dying?* 

For a while, I believed the news I received at Mayo Clinic was my suffering—my big thing to work through. Throughout my journey of suffering, I have found that human pain isn't limited to a one time event—it doesn't wait for things to get better before striking again. There is no lag time in pain. I get no water break, no rest period, no substitute to take my place in the game. In all of this, it has been easy to default to waiting for a miracle or to say, "Things will get better." But what I've found in waiting for my miracle is that my miracle has already come and happened, and it was beautiful.

The miracle was my Savior on the cross, thousands of years ago. It was the plan devised before the creation of the world: that through brutal, terrible pain would come the newness of life. It is the reality that even when I don't believe it, someone truly did sub in for my place in the

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game. It is the old and forever ritual that out of darkness will always come light.

It is my adorable and sacrificial servant of a husband, who is steady and true to me always. It is in the nights when I am drenched in pain that he perks my head up, calls me to the dinner table, and feeds me a meal prepared by his own hands. It is in the way I've seen our love grow beautiful and strong in the midst of such suffering. Like a wildflower in a field of dying weeds, we've grown more lovely surrounded by the dryness of pain.

It is the friends I've had since high school who cover me in prayer and text me after doctor visits. It is in the voicemails from Kenzie and the meals delivered by Savannah, rich Indian food in one hand, bright yellow flowers in the other. It is in the Starbucks coffees and surprise notes from Cassie. It is in the tangible reminders of Christ risen in the hearts of my people.

It is in my mom—a warrior and faithful daughter—who wouldn't dare go against her Savior over "a little cancer." It is Friday night football games in the rain, holding hands with Jake as we walk to the car, and the endless phone calls from my dad just to check in. It is in the Word of God, the songs for the suffering found in its pages. It is in both Old and New Testaments where you will find the anthems of those who walk the road of pain and the God who picked them up again. It is in Scripture itself—how I find myself lost in it and then, again, found.



Some people may look at me and think, "She was just dealt a bad hand." They may think there is no Savior or awaiting miracle to make it all make sense; that this is just the universe and all of its crap. But in my crappy hand, I choose to see my ultimate trump card—the Son of God—and how when I play it, all the other cards seem to slide off the table.

### WEEK ONE

A Song for Grief and Lament



### A SONG FOR GRIEF AND LAMENT *Job 1-3* | *Mark 14:32-36* | *Isaiah 53:3*

We all gathered around my mom in the bedroom of a vacation rental in Nowhere, Florida when she told us her cancer had spread to her bones. It didn't seem like the place for such news—our afternoons had been spent hiking back and forth to the beach and eating sandwiches by the pool; our evenings were filled with card games and bowls of chocolate ice cream. It was on that family trip to Florida when the doctors called and said her stage IV metastatic breast cancer had spread to her bone—her chemo medications weren't working and they needed to come up with a new plan when we returned home. They gave us the news none of us expected, and they left us with more pain than we could handle in that little beach town.



I am one of four children. Add two husbands and a grandkid to the room, and you can safely conclude this was not the way to break the news to us. So many pairs of eves filled with tears and blank looks of confusion as we stared at my mom. She was barely able to process the news herself, let alone tell the army of people who called her "mom." She had no answers to our endless questions as we walked out of that room, and I cried in the shower by myself that night, wondering if she would ever see my future children After she told us, we attempted to go on with the week, playing with my little niece in the mornings and making tacos and pasta and burgers for dinners at night. One night, as I chopped vegetables for a salad for the masses to eat, my mom walked over to me. She rested her head on my shoulder, just inches below her own and said ever so quietly, "This sucks." I almost laughed at how unpoetic and accurate the statement truly was. This did suck! It sucked so much I could barely breathe. It wasn't a profound statementnot one you'd hear on a podcast or from the pulpit-but it was a statement so fitting for the unknown future that lay ahead. I looked at her and said, "You're right, this does suck."

In my own suffering, I have found that so many Christianshave a true resistance to admitting the reality before us.It's as if in the Christian world we don't have permission



to just say that bone cancer sucks because what would that mean about us? What would that mean about our faith? And better yet, what would others think? We want to suffer the *correct* way, the *godly* way, the profound and nice and neat way. Many times, these desires are rooted in the best of intentions, but when held too tightly, they can lead us astray. More often than not, our churches have become filled with Christians hiding in their own pain, because they can't admit their suffering to anyone out of fear of reprimand.

I am here to tell you that it's quite alright to admit that whatever you are facing kind of sucks because in order to get to the hope, perspective, peace, and joy, we first have to admit that what we are facing is scary. It's hard and confusing and feels like it just might wreck us altogether. There is no pretending in the eyes of our Father, no hiding behind nice slogans of "everything happens for a reason." The Lord knows your deepest thoughts and hears the innermost cries of your heart. He is not offended when you tell him this sucks. He is not shaken by our honest cries of confusion, and He is not pushed back by our pain. So for starters, let's admit this sucks. Let's not be afraid to grieve.

Grief tends to be a word reserved for those who have lost a loved one, but I believe that everyone who has suffered has faced some type of loss: the loss of a job, a friendship, or a baby; the loss of a healthy body, a future we thought

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was just on the horizon, or the loss of our best-laid plans; the loss of a home, financial security, or the relationship we thought would end in marriage. Suffering is the story of loss, and I believe that in order to get to the hope, the joy, and the future glory that is to come, we must first grieve what we have lost. We must look at our lives before us and not be afraid to admit that this is not what we pictured or wanted or dreamed up. We must cry the big and ugly tears of grief and feel the pangs of the loss we bear so deeply. We must walk down our road of suffering, not around it, knowing with full confidence that the one leading us down that very road is Jesus our King.

The book of Job has slowly become one of my favorites in the Bible, which might make me the most depressing person in the world. But read the words of its pages and you will find a raw and honest song of grief, one in which Job told his friends—who tried to convict him—that his grief was righteous before our God. Job knew God could handle his grief, and more than that, Job knew God wanted to hear it.

At the beginning of the book of Job, we find a man who essentially has it all. There is a list of the number of donkeys, children, sheep, camels, and servants Job possessed. In modern times, this simply means that Job was living the dream. The Scripture goes beyond that to state that Job "was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Not



only did Job physically have the house and the family and the means to make a beautiful life, he also loved God with all his heart. He was not a man who people viewed as deserving any kind of pain. In our Westernized world of suffering, we often believe that a life with Jesus is a constant exchange in which we hand him our good deeds and he exchanges them for blessings. The book of Job flips this idea on its head, presenting us with a man who loved God fiercely yet endured great suffering.

As the book continues, we hear a series of conversations between God and Satan, which eventually led to Job losing everything he possessed. His children are killed, and his livestock and land are no more. Everything Job had to make his life good was gone. Job experienced great loss of all kinds: the loss of loved ones, financial stability, and a place to rest his head. Some of us may think this is the point in the story where Job looks to the sky and yells, "God is good!" because isn't that what good Christians do? But Job doesn't jump too quickly. He looks around him at all that he has lost, and in chapter one it tells us that Job grieved: *"Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head"* (Job 1:20).

You read that correctly: Job looks around at all he has lost, rips his clothes, and shaves off all his hair. I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like the prelude to an awesome celebration. It sounds like that moment so many of us have faced, when the suffering



becomes too much to bear, and we want to run or scream or punch something. We want to stop pretending that everything happens for a reason because what if that bumper sticker slogan was never true to begin with? It sounds like a breaking point—an honest and true rock bottom—displayed before God himself. It sounds like no more hiding behind the smiles and the "everything's fine" remarks. It sounds like bearing our souls in grief to the One who made us. It sounds like a man who wasn't afraid to grieve.

Job physically acts out the extreme grief that comes with suffering. I can only imagine that this scene was filled with tears and maybe even some yelling. Job experienced incredible loss, and instead of painting his face with a smile, he tears his clothes and shaves his head. This reaction may sound absolutely insane to you because I doubt you are shaving your head. However, I can't help but respect it. I can't help but respect the grand display of emotion, the honest and raw physical display of grief, and the closeness Job must have felt with God where he could act in such a way and still be met with the love of his Savior. If we are being honest with ourselves, suffering brings us to this ugly breaking point that we oftentimes don't like to admit. But Job isn't afraid to write all over his chest, "THIS SUCKS" and scream it unashamedly.

In her book *Holding On to Hope*, Nancy Guthrie says that "Out of the deepest kind of agony and pain from loss,



Job openly mourned. He didn't cover up his sadness or put on a happy face or offer religious-sounding cliches. He tore his robe and shaved his head. He hurt. And he was not ashamed to show how deeply he hurt."

**He hurt.** Job, a man God called blameless and upright, hurt. And that is what brings us all here, isn't it? We are all hurting. Whether it be the loss of our financial stability, our healthy bodies, our loved ones, or our future—we hurt. And even though that hurt looks different for each of us, I have a feeling we can all look at Job and say, "Me too."

It takes great courage to grieve. Grief is not a fun emotion or one we can get over in a day with a good heart-to-heart and a cup of strong tea (although those things may help). Real grief-facing the loss of whatever you are suffering-takes bravery to look it straight in the eyes. When I look at Job in this moment, I can't help but think of how much courage it took to not run and hide, but to stay and grieve. Job had the courage to walk in his hurt-to yell and cry and rip his clothes and shave his head; to face the terrifying grief that lay before him. Grief is scary. It forces us to admit what is right in front of us when we want to cover it up. It says, "This sucks," when we want to say it's sunny. It opens the door to dealing with our suffering instead of hiding in it. Yet it is in this great display of grief that God meets Job in his pain. He sees Job's shaved head and kisses it. He honors





Job's courage and delicately picks up his ripped clothes from the ground and clothes him anew.

Right now, wherever you are, stop and ask yourself: *Have I grieved the loss I am facing right now?* 

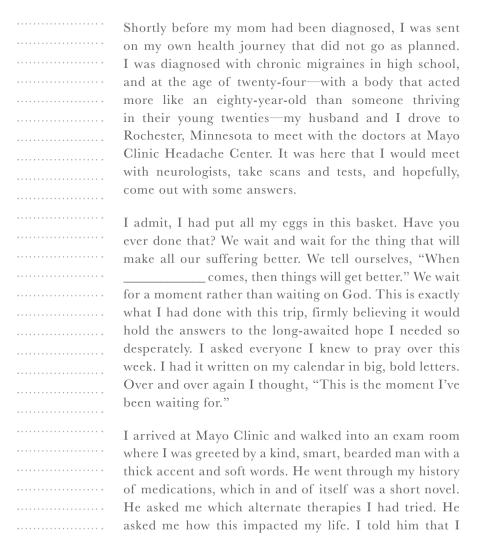
When I looked around at my life marked with pain, I quickly realized I had never grieved my losses. I had never torn my clothes and shaved my head. I had always been too scared to grieve before God, too afraid to be "wrong" in front of him. The book of Isaiah tells us that Christ himself was a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). We have nothing to fear when we grieve what we have lost in front of Jesus. In our sorrow, we meet with the Man of Sorrows, who encourages us to cry and rip and tear and shave. Grief is an essential landmark on our journeys of suffering. It isn't a quick roadside stop or an overnight stay. It is a resting place, a place to sit and stay for a while. If we want to get the comfort and joy and hope that we long for so desperately right now, we must first look to God and grieve.



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was barely hanging onto the job I loved, the friendships I tried to maintain, and the social life that seemed to be disappearing before my eyes. After an examination and some question asking, he looked at me, holding both of my hands tightly, and said, "You are a very, very strong woman, but I am afraid there is nothing I can do."

Not exactly the reason you drive across the country, now is it? The doctor with the thick beard and gentle voice saw the tears welling up in my eyes, and repeated to me the phrase, "You are a very, very strong woman," over and over, like he was desperately trying to put up a banner of hope when all I saw was pain. I walked out of the doctor's office that morning, called my husband, drove back to our AirBnB, and immediately fell back to sleep, unable to face the news I'd been given. God didn't answer my prayers. He didn't bring health. He didn't give me healing.

I don't know if you've ever been there, a place where God didn't answer your prayers. Not the type where you get a B on a test instead of an A that you didn't actually study for in the first place, but the big prayers. The hands-on-your-knees, every morning type of prayers. The prayers for a baby in your womb, or the job to finally provide the financial security your family needs. The prayers for a loved one to make it through the night or the depression to subside. The prayers that feel more like crying or begging. The prayers that have an army





of people raising up the same pleas on your behalf. And then, all of a sudden, it feels like maybe God forgot. The prayers didn't make it up the phone line that day, or maybe, even worse, he heard your cries and desperate pleas and just said no.

Where do we go when God says no? What do we do when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want him to?

As I drove home after that week at Mayo Clinic, I realized I didn't quite know how to relate to God in this space of disappointment. It was easy for me to believe that the people in the Bible always had their prayers answered—that because the Bible seems to sing so loudly the songs of God's promises that the people who make up its pages always got their yeses. Suffering can be an isolating disease, causing you to believe that your pain is completely unrelatable. But as I returned home, I began to hear and see that in the pages of Scripture there are people who also got their big and seemingly unfair nos—including Christ himself.

In the garden of Gethsemane, right before the crucifixion, Jesus prays to God while sweating real drops of blood. He prays, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me" (Mark 14:36). Jesus, knowing he is headed to the cross, asks his Father to take his cup from him, to change the plan, to take away the pain that was before him and draw up something new. And isn't this what we're all asking? Can't God just take our cups



of suffering from us? In my personal trials, I have asked God to remove my cup; to heal my body, and take away my mother's sickness time and time again. And just like Jesus, I have faced my nos, wondering why the cup wasn't ripped from my hand and replaced with a shinier one. In the face of our nos, it is often hard to find a way to

In the face of our nos, it is often hard to find a way to talk, read, or relate to God like we did before. We need a way to see him clearly through the blurriness of our pain.

We need a way to talk to him though our voices may be shaky with confusion. We need a way to hear him when the sounds of suffering seem deafening. We need a way back to his feet that doesn't tuck away the trial, but instead brings it with us. But how do we talk to God when the cup is still in our hands? How do we cry out to a God who is good when our hurt says something else altogether? This, my friends, is where we learn to lament.

In her book *The Louder Song*, Aubrey Sampson defines lament as a "crying out of the soul; [lament] creates a pathway between the Already and the Not Yet. Lament minds the gap between current hopelessness and coming hope. Lament anticipates new creation but also acknowledges the painful reality of now. Lament helps us hold onto God's goodness while battling evil's evil at the same time." It turns out this concept of lament is all over Scripture. Found in nearly seventy percent of the Psalms and various books of the Old and New Testament, lament is an idea fully accepted by God's people. As I



looked again to the book of Job, I found his lament—his pathway to God amidst the pain—and I realized there was a way to live in both the suffering and the goodness of Christ all at the same time.

After Job lost his fortune and his family, we learn in Job 2 that suffering strikes him again, leaving him with "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). I don't know about you, but if I were Job, I would be thinking at this rate I had to be dreaming because it just doesn't seem possible that this much pain could strike one person. Yet, it does, and in Job 3 we read Job's response:

Why did I not die at birth, Come out from the womb and expire?...For my sighing comes instead of my bread, And my groanings are poured out like water. For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes. - Job 3:11, 24-26

Isn't this how we feel? We pray and ask God for healing, for that relationship, for that job acceptance, and yet, it seems like the very things we fear are coming true all around us. It feels like we can't find ease or rest, like our groanings are poured out as quickly as water. Job takes the thoughts we may think in the dark of the night and speaks them to God himself. He does not fear retribution because of his honesty, but he is willing to say to his Maker, "Why did you make me?" 8 m

In Job's words, we see that crying and worship can coexist in a relationship with Christ. We see that suffering and joy are not mutually exclusive and that belief and pain can live side by side. Job decides somewhere along the way that he will not hide his suffering from his Maker. He will not silence his questions or fake away the pain. Instead of turning his back in disbelief, Job accepts God's invitation to sit next to him at the table even when he doesn't have anything to offer. He packs up his heartache and places it at the foot of the cross. He runs toward God even when he's not sure his legs will take him there. He sings songs of pain and makes them his worship. He laments.

This, my friends, is the beauty of lament: When we feel like maybe it would've been better to have never been born, we still have a way through the pain and back to our Creator. Lament is a way to hold onto faith, to our future hope, and to Christ himself. Lament does not say, "You are no longer real," and turn its back. Instead, it whispers in the quiet of the night, "I don't know if you are real, but you are worth the risk."

My dear friends, I believe that Jesus is worth this very risk. I believe that faith in Christ during our hardest moments is costly and messy and worth it. I believe that holding onto hope is the most daring thing we can do with our pain. I believe that the moments you whisper prayers to him on your tear-filled pillow are the most

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brave moments of your life. I believe that he is worth the risk, because in that garden, when his cup was not taken from him, he risked it all for you. So how can you begin to find God amidst your pain? How can you begin to lament? Sing loud the songs of your suffering today, knowing that just like Job, you will be met by the God who was holding onto you all along.

PSALM 43

<sup>1</sup>Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me! <sup>2</sup> For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? <sup>3</sup> Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me: let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! <sup>4</sup> Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. <sup>5</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

"Why are you cart doub, then style and why are you in twendig within one? Hope in God; for I shalf again praise him, my salvation thy

Jalm 42

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. Grief is the act of acknowledging what you have lost. What have you lost in the midst of your suffering? Take time to write those things down. Nothing is too small or insignificant.
- 2. What could grieving those losses look like for you? For me, it was ugly crying. It's totally okay if it's not that for you.
- 3. Lament takes brutal honesty before God without fear of reprimand. What do you need to be honest with God about in the midst of your pain?
- 4. How can you step away from being afraid of your feelings and instead bring your feelings before God?
- 5. How could your prayer life change if you began to lament?

#### SCRIPTURE

Job 1-3 | Isaiah 53 | Mark 14:32-36 | Psalm 43 Psalm 88 | 1 Samuel 1:10-18 | Psalm 42



### MAIN POINTS AND APPLICATION

- Suffering is the story of loss, and it is necessary to grieve and lament our losses to Christ.
- Lament and grief are modeled to us in Scripture. They are healthy, normal feelings that do not disqualify us from following Jesus.
- Lament is a way through the pain and a pathway back to God himself.
- Lamenting leads us to worship God for who he is, not for the circumstances presented to us.

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