

Rhythms Week 2

Cultivating the Virtue of Hope by engaging the practice of Lament.

What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? What characterizes and cultivates such a life? ***Rhythms of Renewal**** is a weekly series of meditations designed to help us grow in the virtues that characterize a beautiful and compelling human life by helping us engage in practices that cultivate such a life. This week, we will seek to grow in the *Virtue of Hope by engaging the practice of Lament*.

True hope is more than a positive feeling or wishful thinking. Hope, as Scripture teaches, is about relating to past and present circumstances through an assurance and anticipation of God's promised future. Hope differs from optimism in that it does not look away from painful and broken realities. Likewise, it differs from pessimism in that it does not allow those things to have the last word. For Christians, "the virtue of hope enables us to long for the destiny of union with God as our complete happiness, and for God's help in attaining that destiny" (Mattison, 112).

For many of us, lament doesn't feel hopeful because we don't want to dwell in our broken realities. We don't want to be stuck, or wallow, in our sorrows. The good news is that true lament is not wallowing! It is a dynamic movement. True lament helps us name our sorrows *and* it forces us to remember the promises of God. Lament, then, is an upward movement into the hands of God, the one is lovingly making all things new and whole. This movement is the birth of new hope.

Lament not only draws us to God, but also to others. As we lament and name our sorrows, we cultivate compassion for the sorrow of others. This compassion opens room in our hearts to welcome, comfort, and speak words of hope to one another. It also allows us to weep with one another, just as Jesus wept over our suffering. In lament, we learn to pray with one heart, mind, and voice for the fullness of God's kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). In lament, we become a people, a community, of hope.

Lament is a major theme in scripture. Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2) was not afraid to lament. The Psalms are full of lament, as are other parts of Scripture. Lament is part of robust life with God and one another. Friends, we are allowed to lament, and lament we must if we are to grow in hope.

A note of encouragement: Not ready to move on from Week 1? That is okay! Continue practicing the rhythm of Week 1 until you feel ready to move forward. If you are ready for Week 2, read on. As always, do not feel the pressure to read everything or implement everything at once. Take your time with this rhythm over the week. Choose one or two questions to dwell on at a time. Choose one or two practices to implement at a time. Start where you are and let the Holy Spirit build your rhythms slowly. The hope is grow to be deep people over time.

1. REFLECT. *Consider these questions on your own or with a prayer partner/group:*

- Why do you think lament is a practice that cultivates hope?
- There are many, many Psalms of Lament, such as Psalm 13, 22 and 44. Take a look at these Psalms and find others. What do you notice? How do these models of lament differ from other ways that we express outrage, disappointment, grief, or frustration?
- What makes the practice of lament difficult and/or important?

2. UNMASK THE CORE LIE: *Recognize the power of a core lie we often believe: “Change isn’t possible.” Or perhaps, “Change isn’t needed” (aka “It’s not so bad”).*

Two great obstacles to our practice of lament are our blindness to needed change and our belief that God can not or will not work such change within us or in the world. Since lament is a practice we take up in the “gap” between what is and what ought to be, losing sight of either horizon hinders us.

When we believe the core lie, “Change isn’t possible,” our hope begins to give way to cynicism or despair, and our practice of lament begins to devolve into less healthy expressions of our anger, frustration, and grief. When we believe the core lie, “Change isn’t needed” (aka “It’s not so bad”), our hope is cheapened by our denial or ignorance of reality, and we replace the practice of lament with superficial substitutes (e.g. “look at the bright side”) that cultivate shallow optimism rather than a real, robust hope. Either way, the lie leads us to different practices of escapism, not growth.

Reflect on these lies by reading two versions of the following anti-Psalm (the idea for these comes from David Powlison):

Anti-Psalm 13 - Despair

Forever - that’s how long I will be forgotten and overlooked.
No need to ask. God won’t answer. God doesn’t care. God will never show his face.
The pain I bear in my soul will never be relieved.
I am defeated - always looking up from the gutter of my failure and shame,
forced to behold the glory of others who are “winning” at life,
forced to live under the heavy burden of the “haves” stepping on the “have nots.”
There’s no point in crying out to God.
God can’t help. Or maybe God just won’t help.
Things are the way they are, and they aren’t going to change.
Justice will never come. My day will never come.
My life is a long disappointment, destined to end in death.
There’s nothing God can do about that.
There’s nothing anyone can do about that.
My circumstances tell me all I need to know about God -
God isn’t good. God isn’t loving.
Or maybe God just isn’t real at all.

Any god worth praising wouldn't let my life turn out like this.

Anti-Psalm 13 - Denial

What's everyone so upset about? Why dwell on all the painful stuff?
I don't understand why people feel forgotten by God.
God isn't hiding his face from us!
I see God's face in the sunrise and in the face of everyone I meet.
There is no need to bear such pain in your soul or dwell on sorrows all day.
Life is what you make of it, so choose happiness! Stay positive, and stay busy.
Life is much more enjoyable if you stop worrying about what's fair
and just accept things the way they are. Life is good!
I choose to focus on uplifting things and not get bogged down in all the political stuff.
Life is too short to get caught up in all of that.
Whenever I pray (I find prayer very fulfilling, so I try to remember to do it),
I focus on giving thanks for the good things I already have
rather than asking God to do things or fix the broken things.
I know God helps those who help themselves, and I've been fortunate -
I have worked hard enough to be pretty successful in my life.
I've always been willing to bet on myself,
and my heart is glad for the success I've enjoyed.
So I try to give back, you know,
because I find it personally fulfilling to deal bountifully with God.
I'm in a really comfortable situation,
and I hope things will be this way for a long time.

Notice the core lie at work in your life. Where in your life do you notice yourself believing the lie, "*Change isn't possible*" or "*Change isn't needed*" (aka "It's not so bad")? If neither of those feels like your core lie, what do you think it might be? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom. Become curious about your believing the core lie. What do you feel when you are believing this? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

3. REMEMBER THE CORE TRUTH. *God loves you, and God loves the world he has made.* God grieves the suffering and evil that plague his creation, has entered our suffering in Jesus Christ, has triumphed over evil and death in Jesus' resurrection, and has unleashed his Spirit (the divine change agent) in you and in the world. All things are possible with God, who is our hope.

Psalm 13

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have prevailed';
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
But I 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.

Become curious about believing the core truth. What do you feel when you are believing the truth instead of the lie? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

4. FOOD FOR INSPIRATION & IMITATION. Look at how Jesus exemplifies lament and hope in John 11:32-44:

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

5. Questions for Prayerful Examination

- When you think about becoming the person you long to be, what do the virtue of hope and the practice of lament have to do with your becoming that person?
- How do you think practicing lament (weeping with those who weep, crying out to God) might help you become a better friend, neighbor, family member, ally, spouse, parent, roommate, or co-worker? How might it help you be more present to yourself?
- What do you find transformative about Jesus' life of lament and hope, and what's one way that you can imitate Jesus's practice of lament in your own life this week?
- In light of this conversation, where in your life do you need God's help right now?

- “Pandemic Reflections”: Sometime this week, share with a friend your answers to these questions:
 - What is one thing that COVID has taken from you?
 - What is one thing that has stayed the same for you during COVID time?
 - What is one gift that COVID time has given you?

6. MICROPRACTICES FOR THE WEEK.

Arrow Prayers. We’ll offer some of these each week. The title comes from Sally Lloyd Jones, whose “Jesus Storybook Bible” many of us have loved and used. The idea is that prayer doesn’t have to be complex to be meaningful and real. Here are some “arrow prayers” for this week’s practice:

- God, why do you seem so far away? Come to my rescue as you promised!
- Lord, I am overwhelmed with grief. Come with your hope!
- Jesus, be with _____, whom you love and who needs your help.
- God, you are trustworthy and good. Help me to trust you with _____.

Habit Stacking. Habit-stacking is the practice of adding a new habit onto something you already do habitually (e.g. brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or walking to work), a term we learned from James Clear in *Atomic Habits*. Some ideas:

- When you are outside today (working, playing, exercising, commuting), pay attention to the people you encounter. Are they in pain or distress? Practice seeing them as God sees them. Allow their pain to move you. Ask God to help you grieve what God grieves and to give you the courage to offer help, a listening ear, or prayer.
- Print out a Psalm of lament or one of the prayers of lament [here](#). Cut it out and tape it to your bathroom mirror, above your sink, or next to your computer. Lament in hope as you brush your teeth, wash dishes, or Zoom.
- At the dinner table, ask one another about what was hard today. Listen and lament together, and practice longing for God’s kingdom together.

Practices of Prayer and Lament for Community & Mission

- “Listening & Lamenting.” Think about the following practice when a friend comes to you with a sorrow:
 - *Step 1:* Listen to the story of pain, and let it move you to empathy. Do not try and offer solutions, but a listening ear. Respond by thanking your friend for trusting you with their sorrows.
 - *Step 2:* Enter their suffering by writing a 3-5 sentence “psalm” of lament that reflects what you heard. Begin with the words, “How long, O Lord? Will you....” Share what you wrote with the person who shared their story with you and turn to God together.
- Ask someone to pray for you today about something specific, and ask how you can pray for them.

- Pray for someone you encounter today who seems burdened or lonely. Ask God to help you bless that person.
- Pray for the chance to help neighbors carry their sorrows. Ask God for the desire and opportunity to befriend your neighbor in deeper ways.
- Pray for God to show you something new today about how racial injustice affects someone other than you. Ask for God's help to grow in empathy, humility, and love through mutual lament.

Sources Cited

William C. Mattison III, "Hope," in Michael W. Austin and R. Douglas Geivett, eds. *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 112.

**Rhythms of Renewal is adapted with permission from resources by our friends at City Church Philadelphia.*