



Horizons

2020-2021 PW/HORIZONS BIBLE STUDY

INTO THE LIGHT

Finding Hope Through
Prayers of Lament

BY P. LYNN MILLER

WITH SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS BY DEE KOZA



LEARN HOW BRIGHT AND SUNNY ACTIVE SENIOR LIVING CAN BE

Find sun and warmth in the Sunshine State with Westminster Communities of Florida, offering communities throughout the state featuring great options to fit your lifestyle. Choose from waterfront, suburban and city locations, all part of our not-for-profit, faith-based family. Discover an active lifestyle to meet every interest, made sunnier by wellness of body, mind and spirit. No matter what choice you make, you'll enjoy services and amenities like restaurant-style dining, housekeeping and more. Plus, rest easier with the assurance of supportive services available on campus.

*Call today to learn why a Westminster community
is the brightest choice you can make.*

1-800-948-1881 ext. 226



**Westminster
Communities**
of Florida

www.WestminsterCommunitiesFL.org

Live Well. Be Happy.

Bradenton | Jacksonville | Orlando | St. Augustine | St. Petersburg | Tallahassee | Winter Park



Contents

About This Bible Study	2
PW Purpose	2
About the Authors.....	3
Things to Look for in the Study.....	3
Introduction	4
About the Art	7
Lesson One—The Heart of Lament	
Scripture: Psalm 22:1–19 and Matthew 27:45–56	10
Lesson Two—Lamenting Together	
Scripture: Psalm 137	20
Lesson Three—Women’s Lament	
Scripture: Jeremiah 9:17–21; Matthew 2:16–18	28
Lesson Four—Lamenting Death	
Scripture: John 11:28–37	36
Lesson Five—Lamenting Life	
Scripture: Job 3:1–4, 9–19, 24–26.....	44
Lesson Six—Lament Over the City	
Scripture: Lamentations 5:1–22; Luke 23:26–31	54
Lesson Seven—Creation Laments	
Scripture: Isaiah 24:4–6, 8, 19; Romans 8:19–23	64
Lesson Eight—God Laments	
Scripture: Hosea 11:1–9; Luke 19:41–44 (Matt. 23:37–39; Lk. 13:34–35)	72
Lesson Nine—The End of Lament	
Scripture: Isaiah 25:6–10; Revelation 21:1–8	82
Annotated Bibliography	92
PW/ <i>Horizons</i> Bible Study Development Process	93
Available Resources.....	94
Schedule and Notes	95
2020 and 2021 Calendars	96

About This Bible Study

In the late winter/early spring of each year, representatives from Presbyterian Women, Inc.'s Board of Directors gather as a Bible study committee to select a topic and an author for an upcoming Presbyterian Women/*Horizons* Bible study. The process of selecting the topic and the author for each PW/*Horizons* Bible study is filled with intentionality and openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

On March 29, 2017, the board's Bible study committee selected P. Lynn Miller's proposal to write and create the art for a study based on lament. Lynn is the first author to both write and illustrate a PW/*Horizons* Bible study.

We give thanks for the creative and enthusiastic women of the 2017 Bible study committee: Chris Murphy (chair), Susan Barlow, Laura Cheifetz, Jane DeFord, Cecilia Moran, Vicky Terry, Francena Willingham, Evelyn White, and Carol Winkler (ex officio). Betsy Ensign-George and Susan Jackson Dowd staffed the committee. We look forward to using *Into the Light: Finding Hope Through Prayers of Lament* to help us study the Bible together this year.

Please turn to page 93 to read about the groups that field tested *Into the Light*.



PW Purpose

Forgiven and freed by God in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves

- to nurture our faith through prayer and Bible study,
- to support the mission of the church worldwide,
- to work for justice and peace, and
- to build an inclusive, caring community of women that strengthens the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and witnesses to the promise of God's kingdom.

PW/*Horizons* Bible Study and Magazine Volume 34, Number 3

Copyright © 2020 *Horizons*
Presbyterian Women in the Presbyterian
Church (U.S.A.), Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means, including tape and video, without permission in writing from the publisher. When material from *Horizons* magazine or Bible study is used in any way, *Horizons* must be credited as the source.

Horizons (ISSN-1040-0087) is published bi-monthly with a special Bible study issue at 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396, by Presbyterian Women in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Inc. Periodicals postage paid at Louisville, Kentucky, and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes directly to *Horizons*, PO Box 421, Congers, NY 10920-0421.

Subscriptions

The subscription rate for *Horizons* is \$24.95 for a one-year subscription; \$44 for a

two-year subscription; \$63 for a three-year subscription (overseas, add US \$10 per year). Bulk rate for five or more subscriptions to one U.S. address, \$17.95 each per year; two to four subscriptions to one U.S. address, \$18.95 each. Single issue magazines, \$4.00. Additional copies of the Bible study ordered separately, \$10 each. A digital edition of the magazine is free to all print subscribers and is available outside the print subscription for \$15.00. To order or renew subscriptions, call 866/802-3635 or visit www.pcusa.org/subscribe. Allow eight to twelve weeks for your subscription order to become effective. For an address change, call 866/802-3635. Allow eight to twelve weeks for the change to become effective.

Single issues

Order single issues of the magazine or Bible study by calling 800/533-4371 or visiting www.presbyterianwomen.org/shop.

Scripture

Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the

National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. [Please note that the proper name for God has been used in place of gender-specific pronouns for God (e.g., "he" and "him"). Those replacements are indicated by the use of (NRSV, Alt.).

Archiving

Microfilming will be completed by NA Publishing. For more information, contact Content Acquisitions, NA Publishing, PO Box 998, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-0998, or info@napubco.com; 800/420-6272.

Staff

Sharon Dunne Gillies; Betsy Ensign-George; Cheri Harper; Carissa Herold; Yvonne Hileman; Susan Jackson Dowd; Laura M. Lee; Patricia Longfellow; Rhonda Martin; Stephanie M. Patterson; Mindi Stivers; Jung Ju Winner



Visit PW and *Horizons* online,
www.presbyterianwomen.org

About the Author



Lynn Miller, author and artist, is a minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She received her MDiv from Union Presbyterian Seminary (Richmond, Virginia) and the DMin from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, in conjunction with the University of Aberdeen (Scotland). She has served as a workshop leader, graphic designer, and keynote speaker for conferences and gatherings on theology, worship, spirituality, education, and the arts. She provided the suggestions for leaders for the 2016–2017 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Who Is Jesus? What a Difference a Lens Makes* by Judy Yates Siker. Lynn has been a practicing artist for 25 years. She holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in fine arts and art history. Her work is in private and church collections throughout the U.S.

About the Suggestions for Leaders Author



Dee Koza is a certified Christian educator, commissioned lay pastor, and a commissioned ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). A graduate of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education (Union Theological Seminary), Dee has served in presbytery and national staff positions and in seven churches as an educator. Presently, Dee serves as pastor of Geneva Presbyterian Church in Geneva, Alabama.

Things to Look For in the Study

Lessons include an opening prayer and a closing prayer. Use the prayers provided, or choose or write your own, to open and close your lessons. Questions to consider and maybe discuss are placed within the text of each lesson. When you come to one, take time to read it and follow where it leads.

Suggestions for Leaders follow each lesson of *Into the Light* and contain more than enough teaching activities for one hour of group study. We know that groups use PW/*Horizons* Bible studies in different ways and for varying lengths of time. Feel free to pick and choose from the activities offered.

Online resources include a Scope and Sequence that provides an overview of the study. The titles, scripture, and main idea of each lesson can be found in the Scope and Sequence. Joyce MacKichan Walker, author of the *Workshop for Leaders*, prepared a list of suggested hymns for *Into the Light*. The list of hymns is part of the *Workshop for Leaders* (HZN20101). Go to www.presbyterianwomen.org to download or order these free resources.

THANK YOU for choosing the PW/*Horizons* Bible study

There are many Bible studies from which to choose, but you chose this one.
Thank you. Your choice matters to Presbyterian Women.

Part of our Presbyterian Women Purpose is to “nurture our faith through prayer and Bible study.” Each PW/*Horizons* Bible study—like this one—links Presbyterian women in a shared experience across PW and with our ecumenical friends and partners. Unlike other studies, PW/*Horizons* Bible studies are created with Presbyterian women and our ecumenical sisters (and brothers!) in mind.

You see, Presbyterian women dedicate themselves each year to the important task of developing the next Bible study. Many minds, hearts, and hands are involved in choosing, writing, editing, and field-testing each study. See page 93 to learn more about PW’s Bible study development and field-testing process.

Thank you for studying the Bible with Presbyterian Women!

Introduction

Why lament? This question can be asked in at least two ways:

- Why offer a study of Biblical lament?
- Why bother to lament at all?

Both questions can be answered by considering the many things in our world that remind us that God's reign has not yet come. War, sickness, death, unfulfilled lives, and threats to creation and to society all cause us to look to God for relief of our pain.

How do we as followers of Christ acknowledge that, even as we work to change them, the existence of these things works against God's purpose for the world.

Current practice turns these and many of society's controversial issues into a fight between "us" and "them." In an argument like this, the first step is to choose a side. The second step is to dehumanize those who have chosen the side that is not our own. Each side hurls accusations and insults at the other on social media, television news, and in printed media. The result is very little movement toward addressing the actual issue.

Our faith offers another option: lament.

But how do we lament? Have we forgotten—or never learned—how to lament? A study of Biblical lament that includes opportunities to reclaim the practice of lament can help us live faithfully in this in-between time, engaging the real world with our faith and our faith with the real world.

Defining Lament

Today, the word *lament* is often used when we really mean *regret*. We lament our thoughtless words. We lament a choice we made. We lament something we have done. An analytical definition of *lament* describes it as an emotional statement of sorrow or grief. Lament often concerns an event in time—in the past, present, or future. Public lament announces wrongs and injustices both to God and to neighbor. Lament is directed toward the one who is believed to have the capacity to change the situation or correct the injustice. Biblical lament often includes a statement of trust that God will change the situation or right the injustice.

Laments spoken to God are prayers. However, laments are not just spoken prayers. The psalms of lament were sung prayers. Prayed, sung, spoken, painted,

What are the particular issues or circumstances in your congregation, your local community, and our world that remind you that God's reign has not yet come?

danced, or communicated in some other way, laments bridge the space between our faith in God and the reality of living in our not-yet-redeemed world.

What Lament Is Not

Thinking of Biblical laments as prayers of lament might give us a better understanding of what the practice is and what it is not.

Lament is not whining. It is not about demanding that our feelings and our stories be the prime focus. Lament is not a pat on the head for people who are suffering or oppressed or preyed on. Lament is not venting or blowing off steam.

Lament is not the appropriate response for situations over which we have control. If there are situations of injustice and suffering over which we have control and we do nothing, then the faithful response is to confess and repent our inaction rather than lament.

The Absence of Lament

Momentous occasions of grief are times for lament. Large-scale natural disasters, events of terrorism, and tragic accidents all bring people together and fill our sanctuaries as we ask, “Why?” and mourn the loss of life.

Weekly congregational worship rarely includes opportunities to lament but perhaps it should. Lament is a proper liturgical response to the suffering and sorrow of the real world. Prayers of lament are petitions to God that come out of real need. When we offer prayers of lament to God, we declare our trust in God and our dependence on God. We acknowledge the depths and effects of suffering on human beings and on creation. Lament adds the voice of Good Friday to the voice of Easter morning. Reclaiming lament in worship reclaims the wholeness of a life of prayer.

As we will see in this study, Jesus himself offered prayers of lament and noted suffering and sorrow in the world. If we are to pattern our lives after his, we need to reclaim lament in our personal and corporate worship.

Lament in Scripture

Lament is a conspicuous part of Old Testament scripture. In individual lives and the life of the nation, the faithful boldly offer their laments to God. In some cases they demand that God act, and act now. Old Testament laments include

- the request (or demand?) that God act violently against the enemies of the lamenter,
- arguing with God, and
- a rejection of the idea that sin is the root cause of an individual’s suffering.

The laments—sung, spoken, and prayed—are bold, indeed.

New Testament scripture has fewer laments than Old Testament scripture, but early followers of Christ would have used the laments from Psalms and other parts of scripture in their own worship and devotions. In the Gospels, there are moments when people use a lament to voice their concerns: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38), for example. Even Jesus spoke aloud the words of a psalm of lament in Matthew 27:46 (look for this in Lesson One).

Each lesson includes at least one scripture passage to study. In some lessons there is a New Testament passage that quotes directly from the Old Testament (see Lessons One and Three). Some of the texts are related in theme (see Lessons Six and Seven); others are related in form (see Lessons Four and Five). Lesson Eight reminds us, through the use of scripture from both testaments, that even God laments. Despite its placement as the final lesson, Lesson Nine prompts us to remember that lament does not have the last word.

Using the Study

The study explores lament in a number of different contexts. The most familiar associations of lament with scripture are probably Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Job. Each of these situations of lament and more will be considered in particular lessons. Lessons One and Two: psalms of lament; Lesson Three: laments by women in Jeremiah and Matthew; Lesson Four: lamenting the death of Lazarus; Job's lament in Lesson Five; the Book of Lamentations and the lament over the city in Lesson Six; Creation's laments from Isaiah and Romans in Lesson Seven; God's lament over God's creation in Hosea, Luke, and Matthew in Lesson Eight; and, in Lesson Nine, God's promised end of lament in Isaiah and Revelation.

All nine lessons share a similar structure. After the main idea, focus scripture, and opening prayer, "Before You Begin" questions stimulate thinking about situations and ideas relevant to the lesson. These questions may be completed by participants alone, before they gather together for study, or discussed at the beginning of the gathering time. Considering these questions before study may yield unexpected insights that participants bring to the study; after the study you and they may be thinking more in ways that the study itself suggested.

Each lesson's scripture passages are presented with study notes and questions for reflection. Entire texts are included, although sometimes passages have selected verses rather than uninterrupted passages. You may want to read the entire passage, including the parts that were omitted, and dig into the texts, exploring how the passages prompt questions and insights for you, before moving to the body of the lesson.

In each lesson, the scripture study sections are followed by a reflection section that builds on the scripture passages and broadens the particular aspect of lament that is the focus of that lesson. This reflection section includes an essay, a non-Biblical lament to be considered in light of the texts, and prompts for creating your own lament.

Creating laments is an important part of the study. The goal of the study is not only to *learn about* lament but to help us reclaim lament *as a practice*. This means we should be creating new laments that speak to the issues and needs closest to our own hearts today. You may want to get a notebook or have another way to collect the laments you create over the course of the study. You will decide what issues and needs are important to you. Your creations need not be perfect or even excellent. What they do need to be is authentic—arising in your heart from your concerns and your faith in God.

Each lesson concludes with a section called "Trusting in the God of Hope" that includes an additional passage from scripture that addresses the subject of the

Because of the personal and often emotional nature of lament, you may want to see "how the story ends" and read the final lesson before beginning the study. While each lesson finds hope in lament, Lesson Nine focuses on our sure and certain hope that one day there will be no more lament. You might also want to refer to Lesson Nine if there are times and occasions during the study when you need to be reminded of that hope.

lesson and helps us remember in order to hope. Some lessons also include hopeful practices your group may want to try. Wait and read that passage right before the closing prayer. You may also want to keep that passage available to read often as you work through the questions, practices, and conversations of each lesson.

Why Lament?

Why bother to lament? Because lament

- is communication with God,
- broadens our prayer lives,
- connects us to the world and the God who loves it and us,
- helps us focus on the actual situations that lead us to lament,
- is an opportunity to confess our faith in God whose promises are trustworthy.

When we lament, we move from suffering to faith. In our faith there is hope. We lament in order to hope.

The concept that we lament in order to hope isn't as unusual as we might think. Essayist and educator Albert Murray wrote that blues music isn't just about speaking the blues, it is as much about "stomping the blues." Playing releases the blues and lifts the player (or listener), allowing them to move on. So play on! And then move on—to hope. And to the day when there is no more mourning or crying or pain or death.

About the Art

Lament provides containers or carriers, a form, for conversations with God. Lament does not necessarily encompass everything about an issue, or all of a complaint about, or a complete description of, the situations that give rise to lament, but lament does give humans shapes for their prayers to God. The illustrations for *Into the Light: Finding Hope Through Prayers of Lament* are based on this idea.

For each lesson, a canvas prepared with a coating of gesso was painted with a selection of paints from a pre-determined palette of colors. Some canvases use only a few colors, others use almost every color in the palette. Each background includes splashes of water that might symbolize tears. A monochromatic wash that suggests symbols or scenes for each lesson was painted over the background colors. This portion of the illustration was done as a wash so that the background, representing the whole of the subject, is still visible. The individual images neither confine nor define the subject. The background, which represents the aspect of lament studied in that lesson, continues beyond the image and off the canvas.

Each illustration includes the shape of a classic vessel. Each of these containers was selected for its relationship to the lesson's subject. Again, the vessel does not contain the whole lament, but it does outline a portion of it clearly. The cover features images of the variety of vessels that can contain laments.

The paintings are 9" x 12", acrylic on linen.



A Note from the Moderator of Presbyterian Women, JyungIn (Jenny) Lee

I love how this Bible study provides mini commentary on the texts selected for each lesson. Then we are gently led into seeing the lamentations around us, and we learn that lamentations are not complaints. The study provides ample space to hear the lamentations of others and ourselves. It may be uncomfortable at times to sit with the lamentations we see and hear, but we will learn to lament together and hope together. By the end of each lesson, you might be heavy in heart or feel grieved, but in the end, lamenting to God leads us to hope. A strange joy and strength arise when we lament together. We often want to rush to hope and happiness. Go slowly, take time, and have faith. By sitting in the pit of lamentations for a while with the caring friends of your Bible Study group, the hope that we reach will be much sweeter. I wish you joy, hope, and most of all, love, through this Bible Study.



Lesson One: The Heart of Lament

Standing alone on a rise of land, the figure of a human has arms outstretched, calling to mind Christ's crucifixion. The figure's form has a shape taken out of it, the shape of the white symbol that merges a circle (eternity) and a three-pointed knot (the Trinity). At the lower left of the painting are cacti, which survive in hot, dry climates by establishing an extensive root system and storing water efficiently. The featured vessel, an *askos*, was used in ancient Greece for pouring small quantities of oil, for tasks like refilling lamps.

Artist's Note: When we lament, we may feel as if there is a God-shaped hole in us, that we are alone in a hostile world. In times like these, our baptism reminds us that God has claimed us and is always with us.



Lesson Two: Lamenting Together

Channels of water by which willows grow set us in Babylon. Hung up among the branches of the willow trees are hints of lyres. The featured vessel is a *transport amphora*, used in ancient times to transport oil in ships across the Mediterranean Sea.

Artist's Note: We belong to God, even when we are carried away from what we know. The psalm's image of the lyres and willows is an evocative image of sorrow and yearning.



Lesson Three: Women's Lament

A woman sits weeping with her face in her hands. At her back is an iris, also called the sword lily. The combination of images recalls Simeon's words to Mary as the baby Jesus was presented in the Temple. Simeon told Mary that "a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Lk. 2:35). The *pyxis* is a cylindrical container, usually with a lid, used to store cosmetics and ointments.

Artist's Note: Works like *The Madonna with the Iris*, by the workshop of Albrecht Dürer (National Gallery, London), have highlighted the relationship between Mary and the sword lily. This illustration is based on that association.



Lesson Four: Lamenting Death

A cemetery with graveside crosses in rows is surrounded by cypress trees. Cypress trees are symbols of mourning and are often found in cemeteries. The *lekythos* featured in the painting is a pouring jug that was often used in ancient Greek funerary rites.

Artist's Note: This scene was inspired by two photographs of cemeteries in Italy. The painting isn't a copy of either photograph, but the images made a vivid impression on me.



Lesson Five: Lamenting Life

A sunflower and an hourglass symbolize days that stretch out before the one who laments life. The *kylix* is a common type of drinking cup that was used in the ancient Greek world.

Artist's Note: Sunflowers are called sunflowers because they resemble the sun and its rays and also because young flowers turn their faces to follow the sun as it moves through the sky. Sunflowers follow the sun every day. The movement of time—minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day—can seem endless to people who are lamenting life.

Lesson Six: Lament Over the City

The city skyline across the top of the image stretches out behind an olive branch. The olive branch is a symbol for peace and is included to encourage us to pray for peace in our cities. The vessel in the lower left corner is a *calyx krater*. Kraters are mixing vessels, representing here the mix of people and ideas that come together in places of civilization.

Artist's Note: The skyline is an amalgamation of places where I have lived. I thought about using a Jerusalem skyline but then realized the invitation to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (which is next to the Mount of Olives), should be an invitation for us to pray for our cities as well.



Lesson Seven: Creation Laments

The earth is in the background, with the continents arranged as they might fit together in a single supercontinent. The flower known as bleeding-heart arches in front of the globe. The *volute krater*, another mixing vessel, symbolizes the mix of animals, plants, and other life forms that must exist together on our planet for us all to thrive.

Artist's Note: I'm interested in the idea that there was once a supercontinent on the earth. As I sat down to consider illustrating creation, I realized that choosing to show one side of the globe would mean not showing the other. The idea that the continents might once have been connected (the name Pangea has been given to that supercontinent), well-represents the idea, I think, that all of creation was and is still connected.



Lesson Eight: God Laments

Redwood trees are too tall and too big to fit in this picture space. But in their ecosystem, these ancient giants are integrally related to the ferns and plants that grow at their feet. The *oinochoe* is an ancient Greek pouring vessel with one handle; it is usually taller than it is wide.

Artist's Note: Redwood trees can reach dimensions of eight to twenty feet in diameter and live for thousands of years. I find it hard to grasp something that amazing. And that those giant trees are connected to the rest of their ecosystem is astonishing. Redwood trees are almost as astonishing as the vastness of God and God's love for us.



Lesson Nine: The End of Lament

Loutrophoros, indicating a tall-necked, two-handled vessel of ancient Greece, literally means "bathwater." As a vessel, the *loutrophoros* was used for pouring water for baths. Here, it pours ginkgo leaves. The Ginkgo biloba is among the most ancient of trees, having been found in fossil form and dated to more than 200 million years ago.

Artist's Note: Baptism is the bathwater of Christians. Through baptism we are called God's own. We belong to our infinite, eternal, unchanging God, because God claims us and says we do. In this image, the vase is not standing as a container; it is in use as a pouring vessel. The ginkgo leaves represent the water poured out in our baptism.





LESSON ONE

The Heart of Lament



Main Idea

The perceived absence of God is at the heart of lament.

Focus Scripture

Psalm 22:1–19; Matthew 27:45–56

Opening Prayer

Great God, be present now as your people come to your word,
as we ponder our lives,
as we understand anew your love for us.
May our questions come from honest places
and our love for you be heard in every word we say.
Amen.

Before You Begin

- Describe times when you have felt that God is farther away from you than you want God to be. How did you feel during those times?
- Describe times you have felt God to be very near. How do you describe the presence of God? How was God's presence conveyed to you—by a place, by a person, by a song, or by something else?
- Describe ways that you could help someone know that God is present in their life.

Psalm 22:1–19

- ¹My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
- ²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
- ³Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- ⁴In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- ⁵To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
- ⁶But I am a worm, and not human;
Scorned by others, and despised by the people.
- ⁷All who see me mock at me;
They make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
- ⁸“Commit your cause to the LORD; let [God] deliver—
Let [God] rescue the one in whom [God] delights!”
- ⁹Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.
- ¹⁰On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
- ¹¹Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
- ¹²Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
- ¹³they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
- ¹⁴I am poured out like water,
And all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
- ¹⁵my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
- ¹⁶For dogs are all around me;
A company of evildoers encircles me.
my hands and feet have shriveled;
- ¹⁷I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
- ¹⁸they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they caste lots.
- ¹⁹But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

Notes on the Text

Psalms 22 is structured in two parts. Verses 1–21 are a prayer for help. Verses 22–31 praise God for helping. Within each of those sections are smaller units. The prayer for help has two sections (verses 1–11 and 12–19), each of which concludes with “Do not be far from me.” Verses 1–11 are further broken down into two sections that lament the psalmist’s trouble (1–2, 6–8) followed by two sections that express confidence in God (verses 3–5 and 9–10).

Verse 1: The opening phrase “My God” establishes that the psalmist is in relationship with God. The entire psalm should be read with that relationship in mind. It is also important to remember that even though the psalmist feels God to be absent, the psalmist addresses God and God is present.

Verses 11 and 12: The request that God “not be far from me” is repeated in verse 19. The word *surround* contrasts with *far* in verse 1. Because God is far away, there is room for evildoers to get close to the psalmist, even to surround the psalmist.

Matthew 27:45–56

⁴⁵From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ⁴⁷When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” ⁴⁸At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” ⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

⁵⁵Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. ⁵⁶Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Notes on the Text

Aspects of the crucifixion story are shared in the Gospels: Matthew 27:45–56 parallels Mark 15:33–41; Luke adds the detail of Jesus quoting Psalm 31:5, “Into your hand I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23:46). **How do you hear Jesus’ words from the cross?**

Early Christian martyrs often went to their deaths willingly, bravely, using the occasion to give impassioned speeches about their love for God and calling on others to be faithful as well. **How was Jesus’ experience different from the martyrs who came after him? If you gave an impassioned speech about your love for God, what would you say?**

Verse 54: The Gentile soldiers present at the crucifixion acknowledged Jesus as God's son. As Gentiles, they may not have known Psalm 22 and wouldn't have recognized it as coming from scripture. **How do you think they heard Jesus' cry? What do you think Jesus communicated to them when he yelled out, "My God, my God..."?**

If there is any occasion to lament, it is when we feel that God is no longer present with us. To whom should we take our laments other than to the God who is able to right a wrong? "God, if you will just listen, I know you will respond." But it feels like God is not there and the cry goes up, "Where are you, God?!"

Only someone who is used to the nearness of God will cry out when that feeling of nearness is gone. If God's presence hasn't meant much in a person's life, how will they notice its absence? However, someone who has allowed God to be a vital companion on their life's journey will surely note when that faithful companion seems absent.

It is not an act of little faith, then, to cry out and question God when God seems absent. Crying out to God is an act of great faith. Notice that neither the psalmist nor Jesus prescribed what would fix their situations. Rather they cried out for God to be present and trusted that when God came, God would bring (or be!) the right fix.

What this lament of God's perceived absence does, for the psalmist and for Jesus, and for all of us who call God "*my God*," is keep open the lines of communication. The lament allows us who lament to give voice to the hurt of God's perceived absence in the present situation and it reorients us from earthly timelines and events by calling to mind how God has acted in relationship with us in the past.

Common Elements in Scriptural Lament

There is no one formula for lament in the Bible. Each individual, community, or situation called for a particular shaping of the lament form. Despite individual variations, there are several themes and movements that are held in common.

First, laments address God. The address is one of the elements that encourages us to identify these speeches and songs as *prayers*. With the address, the lament becomes an encounter between the lamenter, or lamenters, and God. "My God, my God . . ." announces the relationship between the lamenter and God. The address isn't to God, but to *my God*.

Second, the injustice or grievance is described to God. God is not allowed to ignore what is going on. Multiple aspects of the injustice or suffering may be highlighted, as the lamenter tells God exactly what is wrong. This explanation describes what, in the current situation, is less than God's plan for creation and God's people. Sometimes the grievance is expressed in questions. "You have forsaken me. Why have you forsaken me?"

Third, a lament usually includes a statement of trust in God. Trust is based on God's saving actions in the past that are brought to mind by remembering them aloud. The actions may be reported to remind the lamenter of the existing relationship with God. The report may also function to remind God of past saving

actions on behalf of the lamenter. Through the statement of trust, both parties are reminded that they are not strangers; they have been in relationship.

Finally, after outlining the complaint and restating trust in God, there is a call for God to act. The call is sometimes phrased as a request and sometimes as a demand. One thing we can learn from Biblical lament is that the lamenters were not afraid to be honest before God. They were not shy in pointing out details to God. They were not reluctant to tell God how they wanted God to act.

Some laments conclude with a statement of assurance that God will hear the petition being made. In that way, the lament ends in hope and in praise of our God, who hears and acts. Our laments are spoken to and focused on the God who is always faithful.

What Is Known and What Is Felt

Sometimes, though, the intellectual knowledge that God is always faithful doesn't seem to make it to our hearts. As we consider suffering—our own or other people's—we may wonder whether God is paying attention. We may wonder whether God has moved away from us. The writer of Psalm 22 is not alone in feeling that God is no longer present. The psalms are full of questions about whether God is fully absent or has deliberately turned away for a moment or longer.

- “Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11).
- “Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble” (Ps. 10:1)?
- “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me” (Ps. 13:1)?
- “O LORD, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me” (Ps. 88:14)?

It is a paradox, isn't it? A contradiction. God's presence is known by its absence. The outline of a thing is defined by the shape of the hole it leaves when it is perceived to be gone. When God feels “gone,” there is a God-shaped hole in your life. And nothing can fill that shape but God.

At the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis, and at the end, in Revelation, God's presence is clear and not questioned. In the beginning, humans know God's presence as God walks in the garden in the evening breeze (Gen. 3:8) and, at the end, when the new heaven and the new earth are a reality and God is the center, the light. The questions of whether or why God is absent come in the time after Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden but before the promised day when God's kingdom is on earth as in heaven. We live in that time.

Learning from Lament

At the heart of lament is the perceived absence of God. What do we learn about God's presence from our lament?

We learn just how empty life without God can be. While earlier generations of Christians might have readily described hell as a place of eternal fire, it has

What role can the community of faith play in helping people know and feel the presence of God?

become more common to hear Christians describe hell as “the absence of God.”² Second Thessalonians 1:9–10a describes separation from God as punishment and destruction: “These [who do not know or obey the gospel of Jesus] will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints . . .” A place of eternal fire or the absence of God: which is the less-violent definition of hell?

We learn that nothing less than the presence of God can fully silence our lament. Jesus expressed complete separation from God as he died on the cross, bearing our sins. Had Jesus’ crucifixion ended there, his lament would have been the last word. But neither the lament nor the crucifixion was the last word. God raised Jesus from the dead, and Jesus ascended into heaven. God was not lost to Jesus and God is not lost to us.

A Contemporary Lament

Sad Songs

Elvis Presley called Hank Williams’ song “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” “probably the saddest song I’ve ever heard.”³ There are several variations of the lyrics, originally written as a spoken-word poem. “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” is, of course, not a biblical lament, but songwriters outside the church have sometimes been more ready to write songs about life’s sadness than writers of religious songs have been.

The bulk of the song is spent on the description of the suffering. The singer’s lonesomeness, which leads to tears, is a repeated refrain. The descriptions of the setting are poetic and evocative: a whippoorwill who has lost the will to live, the moon hiding its face so that it can cry unseen.

Biblical laments are more than sad songs. As effective as they are, sad songs communicate emotion but rarely are they places to look for hope. In a life of faith, we look to God for deliverance and salvation, and we look to God for hope.

Practicing Lament: Elements of Lament

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he gave them a model in the Lord’s Prayer. Not every prayer follows this model, but we learn, use, and remember it. Here, in this first lesson, use the common elements of lament as a beginning model and write your own lament (there is room on p. 18 for your lament).

Choose one of the situations from the list that you made earlier in the lesson, of times when you or someone you know felt God had moved further away from them. If you have never had that experience, you might write a lament for someone whom the world might think has felt abandoned by God.

- Begin with an address to God. Pick a name for God and adjectives that describe God in this situation. Is God merciful? Angry? Eternal? Righteous?

Hank Williams is generally credited with writing “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.” He recorded it in 1949. Find a recording and listen to Hank Williams sing his song. Then, for a completely different interpretation, listen to jazz singer and musician Cassandra Wilson’s cover of the song. B. J. Thomas also recorded the song. How do each of these versions differ in interpretation? Which version seems most like a lament to you? All versions are available on YouTube.

2. See, for example, “What Is Hell? A Biblical Guide of Its Existence,” Christianity.com.

3. In his spoken introduction to the live version of “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” on the 1995 album, *Walk a Mile in My Shoes: The Essential 70s*, Elvis Presley says, “I’d like to sing a song that’s probably the saddest song I’ve ever heard.”

- Next, outline your complaint to God. What is wrong that you would like God to make right?
- Now, add what you want God to do.
- Think back to times that are examples of God's faithfulness. List one or more of these examples as part of your lament.
- State your faith in God at this point. Affirm your belief that God is listening to your lament.

Share your lament with a study group or with a friend. Consider sharing laments you write with the same person or people throughout the study as a way to establish a relationship of trust with one another.

Trusting in the God of Hope

Psalms 139:7–12

- ⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
- ⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
- ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
- ¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
- ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
- ¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

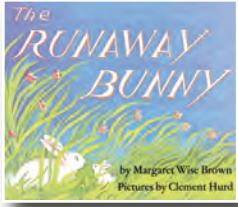
Psalms 139 explores the relationship between a human being and God. Verses 7–12 are a description of the kind of relationship that would lead the psalmist to identify God as “my God” in Psalm 22. Psalm 22 (at the beginning of this lesson) identifies God as “my God.” Psalm 139:7–12 describes a similar closeness with God. The writer of Psalm 139 would probably also identify God as “my God.” God, as described here, surrounds, leads, waits for the writer to arrive, and provides a knowing presence no matter where the writer goes. The writer, the psalmist, knows God through relationship rather than in abstract intellectual terms. God knows the writer because God accompanies and surrounds the writer. The writers of Psalms 139 and 22 experience God as always present.



As you begin your study, know that leader (and reader!) helps are available in many places! Turn to page 94 to take a look—and do visit www.presbyterianwomen.org for even more. (*Horizons* magazine subscribers receive supplemental material beginning with the July/August 2020 issue, so do subscribe. Visit www.presbyterianwomen.org/horizons or call 866/802-3635.)

For groups that are just beginning this study, consider inviting the author to your study meeting! For just \$20 (plus shipping), the **Into the Light Companion DVD** virtually brings Lynn Miller to your setting as she introduces the study and each lesson (each segment is about 10 minutes in length).

Into the Light Companion DVD—order item #HZN20103 from www.presbyterianwomen.org/shop or call 800/533-4371.



Margaret Wise Brown's classic children's book *Runaway Bunny* (HarperCollins, 2005) is a good example of words that provide reassurance of God's constant presence: "If you become a bird and fly away from me, I will be a tree that you come home to." Our God is the ultimate Mother Bunny.

Return to the lament you wrote earlier. What words or phrases from Psalm 22 or Psalm 139 could you add to your lament to provide reassurance of God's constant presence? Using the same situations that prompted your lament, create an affirmation by alternating your phrases of lament with the phrases you chose from Psalm 22 or Psalm 139, or the phrase "You are there." Create your own structure or use this one:

(*Your voice*) Loving God, where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

(*Your voice*) If I . . . (*Add your situation of lament here.*),

(*Your voice*) **you are there.**

(*Your voice*) If I . . . (*Add your situation of lament here.*),

(*Your voice*) **you are there.**

(*Your voice*) Even if I . . . (*Add your situation of lament here.*),

(*Your voice*) **you are there.**

Repeat as needed until each of your situations from your earlier lament has been affirmed with the confidence of God's constant presence. Conclude with the closing prayer below.

Closing Prayer

Loving God,
you are near to us always.
When we lament and when we praise, we feel you near.
May we live our lives in full awareness
that life is lived in your presence. Amen.

Practicing Lament

Use this space to create your own lament.

LESSON ONE

Suggestions for Leaders



Main Idea: The perceived absence of God is at the heart of lament.

Lament in Image

As group members gather, give each person a slip of paper that lists one of the elements of the Lesson One artwork or have each element written on a sign and placed on tables where participants sit.

- The figure with arms outstretched
- The white symbol that is overlaid on the figure
- The cactus plants in the lower left corner of the painting
- The askos vessel in the bottom right corner of the painting

Have copies of the study book turned to the artwork for Lesson One at each table or have participants look at the painting (see page 10) in their study books.

Read together the reason why we lament (from the Introduction): “When we lament, we move from suffering to faith. In our faith there is hope. We lament in order to hope” (page 7).

Ask everyone to consider this reason to lament and the element of the painting they were assigned. Invite them to turn to their neighbors or the people at their tables and tell them one thing their parts of the painting communicate about the suffering, faith, or hope of lament. Do their symbols communicate more of one reason for lament than another? Why do they think that might be the case?

Lament We Bring

Lament is as complex and varied as the people who lament are complex and varied. Each time your study group gathers, members will bring different joys and concerns to your time together. Ask participants to share what they are concerned with today and open the session by praying the prayer on page 11. Consider inviting different people to pray for the group each session.

Lament in Scripture

Scriptural laments are frequently direct and to the point. People who lament often speak out of pain or sorrow or loneliness or desolation. As in this lesson, they cry out to God and wonder where God is and why God doesn't seem to answer them. Psalm 22:1–19, the focus scripture for the lesson, asks: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? . . . I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” The perceived absence of God is at the heart of lament.

Throughout the study we will explore how our human perceptions of God's absence can be opposed to the truth of God's unending love for us. Lament provides a framework for our cries to God and the act of lament is a statement of our faith in God's presence; we lament because we feel lost and we lament because we know that we are not.

Read Psalm 22:1–19 and 27–31 together, asking volunteer readers to alternate verses. While the psalm is read, look for the common elements in scriptural lament (see page 14): address to God; injustice described to God; statement of trust in God; call for God to act; and a statement of assurance that God will hear the lament and act. Reread the lament as needed to find the verses that work for each element. The elements can be found in these verses (and more): address (1a, 2a); injustice described (6–7, 12–18); statement of trust (3–5, 9–11); call for God to act (2b, 19); statement of assurance (27–31).

Lament in Life

Find two or three versions of the song “I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry.” Hank Williams is credited with writing the song and recorded it. There are also versions by Johnny Cash, Cowboy Junkies, Cassandra Wilson, Yo La Tengo, and B. J. Thomas; maybe you know a version that

we don't. Check YouTube, music streaming services, and record collections.

Play your two or three versions of “I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry” for the group. As a group, make a list of the images of loneliness mentioned in the song. Play the versions again as needed.

Invite group members to add their own images of loneliness to the list.

Lamenting Together in Hope

An important aspect of this study is practicing lament—lamenting together so that we know what lament is and what lament feels like.

Use the images of loneliness from your list above and the litany structure and responses below and write a lament together.

Say together: **Loving God, where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I** [*Insert one of your images of loneliness*]

Say together: **you are there.**

Say together: **If I** [*Insert one of your images of loneliness*]

Say together: **you are there.**

Say together: **If I** [*Insert one of your images of loneliness*]

Say together: **you are there.**

Say together: **If I** [*Insert one of your images of loneliness and repeat until you have used all of the images you want to use.*]

Say together: **you are there.**

Or, use the lament structure—address to God; injustice described to God; statement of trust in God; call for God to act; statement of assurance that God will hear the lament and act—and the images of loneliness (or your own laments) to write a lament together.

Close by reading together the lesson's closing prayer (page 18).