

GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
MINISTRY AND MISSION

JAN–APR 2023

INCLUDED IN THIS ISSUE

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Edited by Rachel Tranter and Olivia Warburton

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15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
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Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about or practical application of what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

Valerie Hobbs is a linguist at the University of Sheffield and author of *An Introduction to Religious Language* (Bloomsbury, 2021). Her next book is about gender-based violence within Christian white male supremacy. In her spare time, she enjoys writing about the Bible at lampofthelamb.com.

Andy Angel is the vicar of St Andrew's, Burgess Hill. Previously, he taught New Testament in two Anglican training colleges and has written various books including *Playing with Dragons* (Cascade Books, 2014) and *The Jesus You Really Didn't Know* (Cascade Books, 2019).

Isabelle Hamley is theological adviser to the House of Bishops (Church of England), after being chaplain to the archbishop of Canterbury, a vicar, a theological college lecturer and a university chaplain.

Stephen Finamore is principal of Bristol Baptist College. He is married to Rebecca and has two daughters. Steve has worked as a pastor, a lawyer and in community development in inner London and the Peruvian Andes.

David Spriggs was minister of a Baptist church until his retirement. He continues to enjoy engaging with the Bible as he has done throughout his ministry in local churches and for the Evangelical Alliance and Bible Society.

Philip Grasham is a freelance Bible teacher and writer. He has worked for three different UK theological colleges and was a mission trainer with BMS World Mission. He and his wife also spent twelve years with WEC International including working in West Africa among Muslim nomads.

Pauline Hoggarth was born in Peru, where her parents were missionaries. She taught modern languages in Scotland and London and worked with Scripture Union in the UK and overseas for 23 years. She is the author of *The Seed and the Soil* (Langham, 2011).

Tim Judson is a Baptist minister based at Honiton Family Church in east Devon.

Henry Wansbrough is a monk of Ampleforth, Yorkshire. He has been chairman of the Oxford Faculty of Theology and has also served on the Pope's Biblical Commission and on the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission.

Richard Martin served with the Church Army before ordination to a curacy and an incumbency in Gravesend. He is now priest-in-charge of three parishes in the Gloucester Diocese and is a Third Order Franciscan.

Johannes J. Knecht (PhD, University of St Andrews) is dean of postgraduate studies at WTC Theology and specialises in church history and systematic theology. His primary interests are patristics, Christology and trinitarian theology.

The editors write...

As the world becomes an ever more complicated place to live, it is so important that we remember why we are studying the Bible and God's word to us. Jesus reminds us that, ultimately, it is about love – for our neighbours and for ourselves. In our globalised society, can we say that there is anyone who isn't our 'neighbour'?



Philip Grasham helps us to think about this with his notes in this issue on 'traversing time and crossing cultures', helping us to see how our interpretations have been shaped by the culture around us. Valerie Hobbs also offers notes on 'training our eyes for heaven', helping us to focus on the long story of God's salvation plan without losing our focus on what matters in this life.

This issue offers some further important themes to ponder on the approach to Easter. Tim Judson explains why 'Christian' lament is so important and how we can engage with this often-overlooked aspect of our faith. Meanwhile, Henry Wansbrough looks at repentance and forgiveness, with a particular focus on acts of generosity and extending forgiveness to others.

Other notes in this issue take us deep into the Old Testament. We first continue Isabelle Hamley's excellent series of Judges. She has titled her notes 'justice and mercy in the promised land', and we indeed find these as she walks us through this difficult book. Pauline Hoggarth dedicates two weeks to four of the minor prophets: Jonah, Haggai, Nahum and Habakkuk. These four very different prophets can all teach us something about our world today.

We spend most of this issue in the New Testament. Andy Angel starts a new gospel series on Matthew, beginning with chapters 15–18. In great detail, he takes us through the Pharisees' questioning of Jesus, Jesus' teaching to his disciples and other gems along the way. Stephen Finamore continues his engaging series on Romans and new writer Johannes J. Knecht looks at the letter to the Colossians. In the previous issue David Spriggs explored twin parables, and now he looks at 'internal twin parables' – twins that appear within one parable.

Finally, Richard Martin offers us a week post-Easter to celebrate and reflect on the resurrection. As we ponder this great mystery of our faith, our prayer is that you would be empowered to take the love of God, the love that he displayed through Jesus, to your neighbours and to the world.

A 'Christian' form of lament

Tim Judson



For many around the world, Covid-19 brought the reality of suffering to the foreground of our lives. Struggles with mental health, social isolation and genuine fear of physical suffering in multiple ways have understandably prompted many of us in the church to consider the language and posture of lament. However, this does highlight something important for many of us in the relatively sanitised safety of the western world. The sobering and profound reality is that, for some people, lament is the normal expression of their life experience. Some of us are momentarily stopped when we experience forms of acute suffering. But for others, life involves the struggle of constant suffering, embodied in numerous ways. Lament provides a faithful language and response for believers in the midst of this.

For lament, we often (quite rightly) turn to places such as the books of Psalms, Job, Lamentations or Jeremiah. These portions of the Hebrew scriptures immerse us in a biblical imagination that necessarily disrupts many of us, and comforts others. However, we sadly may overlook the places in the New Testament where the church bears sorrow, sin and suffering through lament. In the following reflections, we will explore together what it means to lament as the body of Christ, as those who hope in the resurrection, who believe Jesus has defeated all sin and who rejoice in the midst of suffering, but in a way that is truly Christlike, truly human, truly faithful. We need to relearn the way of lament in the western church today. The Christian community is a body of people in the world reconciled to God through Christ. Christ's own lament is embodied in the church, for and with the world that is bound to God through his suffering love.

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV.

1 Lament as faithfulness

Matthew 26:36–46

When Jesus was faced with the unspeakable horror that awaited him on the cross, he bore it through prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. It seems as though his life was at times painful, but on this occasion, it was agonising and unbearable. He didn't 'man up' or retain a 'stiff upper lip', but nor did he turn inwards in passive despair and resignation. Some people have no idea how deep and dark the evil in this world can be. Here, Jesus is reckoning with it all in his body, which includes his mind. Maybe he is beginning to spiral into an abyss, and so he pleads with his closest friends, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me' (v. 39). Then he turns to his Father in prayer. 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want' (v. 39).

He longs for comfort, for some sense that everything will be alright. He checks and discovers that his friends have fallen asleep, leaving him to bear all this in isolation. He prays again. Maybe he knows that there will be no resolution for his prayer, no positive mental attitude to muster in himself and hide behind. This is not going to go well; that's the heart of being human sometimes. The answer Jesus gets to his prayer is a non-answer. He is going to die. He is going to experience the ultimate death, separation from God, from others and from the world.

None of us can fully identify with what Jesus has suffered for us. However, we look at Gethsemane and we encounter the God who has descended into the deepest darkness, so that none of us will ever be alone in ours. When we are overcome with sorrow, enslaved to thoughts or experiences which debilitate us, Christ is there. We might not 'feel' him close by. We may not be able to rationally 'know' that he is there. Sometimes it is all beyond us. But that was the same for Jesus. He experienced that too – prayer without answers, no comfort or renewed zeal – just utter bleakness. And the reality here is that Jesus is with us regardless of what we feel or know, because God has borne our sense of abandonment for us.

2 Lament as reality

Matthew 2:13–18

Have you ever heard someone preach an Advent sermon on the not-so-nice parts of the nativity? If you have, you are in the minority. What on earth was Matthew thinking when he decided to put this into our Christmas story?

When I was a kid, Christmas was obviously the most important time of the year. For me, Jesus was cool, but Santa was even better! As the years have gone by, I have grown to treasure the Advent season as an opportunity to contemplate the mystery and outrageous wonder of the incarnation. I must admit, I now enjoy the excitement of Santa with my own kids as well. But Christmas is not exclusively fun for all people. Within all the hype, busyness and celebration, Christmas can be pretty tough. It can spark traumatic or painful memories for some people, and for others, it highlights all the more how lonely they feel.

In our church, we have a special Advent service called ‘Blue Christmas’. It’s not an original idea, but it’s a simple service designed to create a safe space for those who are ‘blue’ at Christmas time. For me, it’s undoubtedly the most worthwhile part of Advent. It feels more real than the glitter and the parties and the cute nativity play. It might sound a bit Scrooge-like to some, but it’s actually wonderfully hopeful. People feel acknowledged. They feel known, and ultimately, they feel loved, because we have welcomed them where they are at, with the claim that God is with them too.

The scriptures remind us that even Christmas should recognise sorrow alongside joy. When God took on flesh in the world, there was a barbaric slaughter of innocent children. I don’t want to bring us down for the sake of it. Rather, I want to emphasise that the gospel is good news for the poor, for the hurting, for those who are crushed and then ignored. Let’s not resist God in the world. Let’s not evade God’s story in the cries of others. As the church, the hands and feet of Jesus himself, we are called to hear and to comfort those who hurt. After all, we rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). We share in Christ’s fullness of life, bound to him and, therefore, bound to the world for which he has come.

3 Lament as protest

Acts 7:51—8:3

Since Jesus ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit has come in power and filled the disciples with the courage and necessary gifts to proclaim the gospel, this radical news which is for both Jews and Gentiles. The church is booming, and God's people are flying by the seat of their pants in trying to keep up with the Holy Spirit's lead. Numerous challenges present themselves, not least in the form of political and religious opposition (a devastating combination). Here at the end of Acts 7, the first member of Christ's body is murdered.

Stephen was a devout man, full of faith, grace and the power of the Holy Spirit (6:5, 8). He performed great signs and wonders among the people, and also took responsibility for the marginalised in the church. This guy was no flaky believer; he was hardcore! But despite his faithfulness, no, precisely because of his faithfulness, he gets martyred. In the midst of prayers for forgiveness over his enemies, the haters close their ears, gnash their teeth and silence God's man (7:54–60).

Stephen, God's child, is stoned to death. We have no time or space to pause, because that same day, the church becomes severely persecuted in Jerusalem, and everyone except the apostles is scattered. Furthermore, the zealous Pharisee, Saul, is in hot pursuit, ravaging the church house by house, imprisoning or killing more as he goes. But do you notice? In the midst of this, a few people stop. In response to the calamity and chaos of this event, Acts 8:2 says that 'devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him'.

Currently, when life is so uncertain and unprecedented, we should pause for lament. At a time when the church is still new and fresh, it finds itself beating its chest and crying out over the intrusion of death into this new life. Even here, in these early chapters of Pentecost power, suffering and tears are a feature of the church. More than that, mourning and the interruption of grief are a stark witness to Christ's protest against death, sin and evil.

4 Lament as blessing

Matthew 5:1–12

Being a disciple of Jesus is complex. He promises to be with us, but his presence does not prevent suffering. In fact, sometimes, following Jesus can involve more suffering. I'm not talking here about getting ill or encountering difficulties within the finitude and limits of our humanness. Those things can be very painful, but they are not necessarily a form of suffering that is caused by being a Christian.

With Jesus, as the New Testament witnesses to us, there should be no surprise if we end up suffering persecution. Allegiance to Christ means that we are not allegiant to money, sex, power and the other gods of this world. Living the truly human life in the power of the Holy Spirit is met with resistance, and that hurts us sometimes. Throughout history, some people have lived radically different lives because of their commitment to what is good and right and true according to the gospel. As a result, they have suffered. But in their suffering, Jesus calls them 'blessed', or, to use another translation, 'happy'. How bizarre!

But it's not that suffering is a blessing in and of itself. That would just be sick! Sometimes, suffering that is borne faithfully within Christ's suffering love can be redemptive, transformative even. Jesus' disciples live in the midst of those who resist God's way of life. It can be tiring; it can seem pointless. But Jesus speaks reality and comfort to his people and says that they are actually blessed, they are known, they are loved and they are enfolded into God's gracious work. In their struggle and need, they are blessed; in their sorrow over the state of the world and their own struggle with sin and temptation, they are blessed.

In other words, it is precisely this posture, as opposed to an over-confident triumphalism, that marks them as Christ's disciples. In their longing for the perfect righteousness of God and their desperation for the fullness of his kingdom, they are blessed. In their crying out, through humility and self-denial for God's lordship alone, they are blessed. They aren't victorious or even blessed in and of themselves. The victory and blessing are in living out the apparent weakness of the cross, which is the powerful key to eternal life. If we don't come to God like this, at the end of ourselves, aware of the brokenness in ourselves and God's world, maybe we aren't as 'blessed' as we think.

5 Lament as repentance

2 Corinthians 7:1–13

The church in Corinth is a kaleidoscope of problems. Paul has his work cut out with them. His previous letter was intense, telling the community off for some pretty awful stuff. Unfortunately, this is way beyond issues about their preferred style of music or who is responsible for the youth work. Paul hears that his earlier correspondence was received with the clout he had intended, and many are really upset with him. However, while he had no intention of upsetting anyone for the sake of it, he is glad that their grief served a purpose. His letter clearly caused them to reflect on their ethical behaviour and the failure to be a communion of Christ. Their grief led to repentance. He calls this ‘godly grief’, which ‘produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret’ (v. 10).

Like the Corinthians, we sometimes lament our wrongdoing when it is highlighted to us. That sorrow can serve as a means of prompting us to address things in our life which require repentance. Sometimes we are confronted with our selfishness, or we realise we have hurt someone. Will we sense any grief in our hearts over this, and be prompted to confess our sin and repent? Will we allow ourselves to be alarmed, to long for reconciliation and healing, and to act upon these Spirit-led promptings?

Alternatively, we may become indifferent, proud and closed off from God and others. We might allow ourselves to feel bad, to believe we are a sinner and tell everyone we are a bad person in a great display of piety and religious self-flagellation. But then, we just dust ourselves off and carry on as though nothing changed. This is what Paul calls ‘worldly sorrow’ and it leads to death (v. 10). This is the clever (and common) way we evade following Jesus. We put on a good performance, convinced that we are faithful, but then nothing changes.

Does our sorrow lead to repentance and new life? Does our feeling exposed cause reflection on our faithfulness to Jesus and our love for others? Do we actually want to live for Christ or for ourselves? When we are challenged about how our lives damage the world around us, do we just feel bad or will we address it? May God give us the grace and indignation to truly lament our sin for Christ’s sake.

6 Lament as prophecy

Revelation 21:1–5

There is a type of ‘holy dissatisfaction’ that bleeds through believers: a longing for God’s kingdom to become physically present in every sense. By having our eyes fixed on Jesus, we don’t blissfully set our sights on heaven and float through life without a care in the world. That sounds more (super-)spiritual than Jesus! But nor should we curl up into a ball, hide from the big bad world and hold on to our anxious thoughts until the ‘afterlife’. We live in the light of God’s eternal life. Our entire existence is to be shaped by the ultimate hope we have in Jesus. This means that we cling to his promise that he is making all things new. The very means and ways we live are shaped by this, not just our goals. God will establish his kingdom on earth fully, as it is in heaven, when Jesus returns.

In Revelation 6:10, there is a moment where the cries of the martyrs are heard, longing for vindication. They are instructed to wait. We too must wait. We are not passive, and nor are we pessimistic or overly optimistic. Christ spurs us to live as citizens of a different kingdom, a different reality, a reality of faith, hope and love. We celebrate all that is good and right and true. Also, we lament the spaces where God’s kingdom reign is yet to become fully and physically present.

In this regard, many of us have a lot to learn from our black brothers and sisters, whose Christian heritage involves encountering the suffering Christ in the bowels of slave ships, through floggings and on the lynching tree. Black spiritual music involves a haunting mix of sorrow and joy, lament and praise. These songs sometimes contained secret coded meanings, a covert refusal to let their humanity be robbed. Jesus would one day set them free (before or through death). Their spirituality helped them retain dignity amid such demonic dehumanisation. Together they would steal back hope and joy by processing despair and darkness through their songs and prayers. This watered the ground with their tears, and Christ grew eternal life in the face of death and the devil. These people truly rejoiced in their lament, that there will be a day when there are no more tears.

Guidelines

- At least two-thirds of the Psalms would be identified as laments. There are laments over suffering, sickness, persecution, sin, mental instability, betrayal, old age and many other things. How do you feel about praying these psalms? If you struggle to relate to them, it is possible that your prayers may be too individualistic. How might God use the 'prayer book of the Bible' (as Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls it) to form and reorient your prayer life as a disciple in the world?
- The Lord's Prayer is known by heart for many of us. Interestingly, every part of it has the scope for enfolding lament within its words. Reflecting slowly on each phrase, you may want to allow the words to broaden your imagination for prayer. How does this affect the way you pray and your relationship with God, others and the world?
- In our western world, we are wired to think we shouldn't suffer, almost as though we are entitled to always be well and free from trouble of any kind. This often forms the way we respond (often unconsciously) to those who suffer, seeing them as a problem to be solved, rather than a person to be heard. Someone once said that being heard is so close to being loved, that they often seem like the same thing. How can our response to those who suffer be faithful to Christ?
- Think about the challenges we have faced in recent years in terms of Covid-19. Compare that with the ongoing struggle of racism that many of us are ignorant of because of our skin colour. Also, reflect on the increasingly concerning situation of global warming and climate change. How might lament shape our understanding and effectiveness within God's mission in the world?
- There is a faithful way to lament, and an unfaithful way to lament. Faithful lament is grounded in Christ, but we often let our cultural sensibilities dictate what we think that looks like. How might Jesus be speaking to us about how we pray and live more faithfully, biblically and holistically in terms of lament?
- Many of our churches think lament is important, but we do not do it. Why is this? How might we change some of our theological and ethical understandings so that we could recognise the healing power of learning to lament in Christ, as his body on earth?

FURTHER READING

J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with incurable cancer and life in Christ* (Brazos, 2015).

Kathleen D. Billman, and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of lament and rebirth of hope* (Wipf and Stock, 1999).

James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis, 2011).

Michael Jenkins, *In the House of the Lord: Inhabiting the psalms of lament* (Liturgical, 1998).

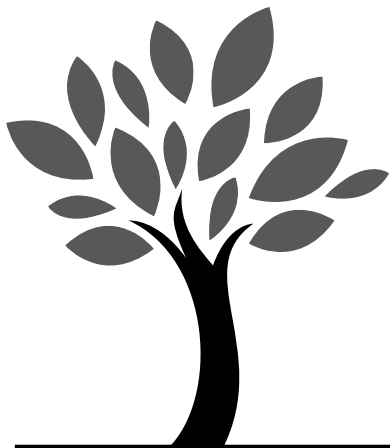
Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcising Evil: A womanist perspective on the spirituals* (Orbis, 1997).

Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A call for justice in troubled times* (InterVarsity, 2015).

John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral responses to the problem of evil* (SCM, 2018).



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Guidelines provides weekly units, broken into six sections, plus an introduction giving context for the passage, and a final section of points for thought and prayer. On any day you can read as many or as few sections as you wish.



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