

W E E P

W I T H

M E



HOW LAMENT OPENS A DOOR
FOR RACIAL RECONCILIATION

Mark Vroegop

foreword by THABITI ANYABWILE

“I am so grateful to God that Mark Vroegop has written this book. Far too often our discussions about racial harmony and reconciliation center on analysis, history, strategies, or the ‘best practices’ of those who have made some progress with regard to inclusion and diversity. What is overlooked is the primacy and power of empathy, ‘weeping with those who weep.’ This profound sense of identification is what the Bible calls lament. I am thankful to Vroegop for calling us to the heart of the matter—*our* hearts. *Weep with Me* is a gift and a treasure.”

Crawford W. Loritts Jr., Senior Pastor, Fellowship Bible Church,
Roswell, Georgia; author, *Unshaken*; Host, *Living a Legacy*

“If the sinful and tragic issues of racial injustice do not drive Christians to lament, it can only be because we do not, or will not, see the reality all around us. This book by the brilliant and faithful Mark Vroegop helps us to see that lament is not despair and resignation but instead the first step toward healing and restoration. This book will help Christians of every ethnicity to learn to love one another and to bear each other’s burdens.”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty
Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“When conversations on race and racial reconciliation seem to produce more heat than light, and more accusation than appreciation, Mark Vroegop provides a timely word in *Weep with Me*. He reveals the simple yet poignant power in the prayers of biblical lament, teaching us the need to weep with those who weep. Lament gives language to both speakers who’ve suffered and listeners who long to understand. This is the hope of lament and the hope of the book: that the language of lament would bring blessing out of brokenness. The author is neither a hopeless romantic nor a helpless idealist. With realistic expectations and unbridled hope, Vroegop conveys inspiration from the biblical language of lament to help us find ways that will promote trust, understanding, and hope. He has helped me to love, listen, and lament; to learn and to leverage. Reconciliation is never easy, yet because of the gospel of Jesus, I will still dare to hope.”

Julius J. Kim, President, The Gospel Coalition; Professor of Practical
Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“As a nation, we no longer know how to talk to each other about issues over which we disagree. Sadly, when it comes to issues of race or ethnicity, that inability has permeated the church. As a result, progress toward ethnic harmony appears to have slowed. But because we are in Christ, we can and should fight for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That’s why I welcome Mark Vroegop’s *Weep with Me*. He gives us a language we can use as we work together toward ethnic harmony. It’s not a man-made language; it’s the biblical language of lament. If your heart longs to see the church display the wisdom and glory of God to the cosmic powers, then you’ll want to pick up this book, read it, practice it, and give it away. Let the conversations begin!”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church,
Austin, Texas

“Imagine if, in Jesus’s story of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14), the publican, instead of repenting of his sins, had become offended by the Pharisee’s assessment of him. Had that happened, you would have had two self-justifying sinners in the story, and we wouldn’t have heard Jesus’s beautiful declaration ‘I tell you, this man [the publican] went down to his house justified.’ So, please, if you are picking up this book in order to be offended, just don’t. But if there is a weariness in your bones over your own sin and the sin of your people, and you long to see gospel unity and solidarity replace suspicion, separation, strife, division, indifference, ignorance, condescension, and contempt, come lament with me for a while, and pray. We are up against something only the Holy Spirit can fix, but he is more than a match for the challenge. Let’s lament our hearts of stone and ask him to give us hearts of flesh (Ezek. 36:26–27). He can. He will.”

Ligon Duncan, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

“*Weep with Me* is grounded in theology, informed by history, and saturated with humility. As a black member of Mark Vroegop’s church, I have witnessed, primarily as an observer, how applying the biblical language of lament to racism has opened the door to reconciliation. Painful conversations between a white church leader and a black church member developed into a deep, trusting relationship. Intense early-morning discussions about race among a multiethnic group of leaders and members led to deeper understanding and biblical unity. A monthly discussion group exposed personal pain, yet weeping together increased shared knowledge and formed healthy relationships.

Casual multicultural interactions on Sundays led to meals together in each other's home. Civil Rights vision trips with the church exposed deep wounds and caused weeping among some and silence and confusion among others, but the language of lament led to enlightenment, caring, and mutual embrace as a reconciled body. Yes, the journey is difficult at times. No, we have not arrived at the dream. Through this book, Vroegop shows us how the language of lament leads to racial reconciliation. It is an encouraging read!"

A. Charles Ware, author; speaker; Founder and Executive Director,
Grace Relations

"Mark Vroegop's earlier book, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, is the best book I have read on Christian lament. It moved me to preach through the book of Lamentations in my own church. Yet I was unprepared for how stirred I would be by the potential impact of Christian lament on racial tensions in the church today. But this is what Vroegop has done in *Weep with Me*. This book is a uniquely insightful contribution to a very difficult issue still largely ignored by modern-day evangelicals. It is a biblically faithful, immensely practical tool that guides us to a simple, clear solution to racial division in the church—empathy through Christian lament. Pastors especially need to read this book and use it to lead their congregations down a path of introspection rooted in the gospel and embodied in Christlike empathy toward all those in Christ. I highly commend this book and the faithful example of its author."

Brian Croft, Senior Pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church, Louisville,
Kentucky; Founder, Practical Shepherding

"The challenges of racial division in America broadly and our churches specifically feel intractable. The conversation is riddled with indictment, hurt, anger, uncertainty, and fear. Yet Mark Vroegop offers a simple, mature, and biblical next step: learn the language of lament. Lament means one thing for the majority-culture Christian and a slightly different thing for the minority-culture Christian, and both lessons are crucial for preparing our hearts for understanding, forgiveness, reconciliation, and action. This book is excellent, and it's hard to imagine how churches will move toward racial reconciliation and the heavenly picture of unity in diversity apart from the biblical wisdom it provides."

Jonathan Leeman, Elder, Cheverly Baptist Church, Bladensburg,
Maryland; Editorial Director, 9Marks

Also by Mark Vroegop

Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament

WEEP WITH ME

How Lament Opens a Door for
Racial Reconciliation

Mark Vroegop

Foreword by Thabiti Anyabwile

Weep with Me: How Lament Opens a Door for Racial Reconciliation

Copyright © 2020 by Mark Vroegop

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

Cover design: Dan Farrell

First printing 2020

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-6759-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-6762-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-6760-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-6761-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vroegop, Mark, 1971– author. | Anyabwile, Thabiti M., 1970– writer of foreword.

Title: Weep with me : how lament opens a door for racial reconciliation / Mark Vroegop ; foreword by Thabiti Anyabwile.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, [2020] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020000827 (print) | LCCN 2020000828 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433567599 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433567605 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433567612 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433567629 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Laments in the Bible. | Grief—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Race relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Reconciliation—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BS1199.L27 V765 2020 (print) | LCC BS1199.L27 (ebook) DDC 277.308/3089—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020000827>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020000828>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To Keith and Yolanda White

Fellow heirs of the gospel
Faithful followers of Jesus
Friends in the reconciliation journey

CONTENTS

Foreword by Thabiti Anyabwile	11
Acknowledgments	15
Introduction: Dream: The Vision of Racial Harmony	17
PART 1 LAMENT IN THE BIBLE AND HISTORY	
1 Pray: The Language of Lament	29
2 Listen: Lessons from African American Spirituals	47
3 Walk: The Bridge of Lament	63
PART 2 LAMENT AND MAJORITY CHRISTIANS	
4 Weep: The Healing Grace of Empathy	79
5 Speak: Ending the Painful Silence	95
6 Repent: Remembering with Remorse	109
PART 3 LAMENT AND MINORITY CHRISTIANS	
7 Protest: The Voice of Exiles	129
8 Triumph: Redeeming the Pain	147
9 Believe: Dare to Hope Again	163
Conclusion: Lament: An Open Door for Racial Reconciliation	179
Appendix 1: Psalms of Laments	189

Appendix 2: Learning-to-Lament Worksheet191

Appendix 3: Sample Civil Rights Vision Trip Itinerary195

Bibliography199

General Index205

Scripture Index211

FOREWORD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thabiti Anyabwile

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction

DREAM

The Vision of Racial Harmony

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

JOHN PERKINS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Weeping and Harmony

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

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

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

But it happened before.

Divided City, United Church

Followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The term means “those belonging to Christ.”¹ However, the name that now defines over a third of the world and two billion people was not self-selected. Other people called the disciples of Jesus “Christians.” Have you ever wondered why?

Ethnic harmony was part of the story.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

New People

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

The world had no category for them.

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

Spiritual oneness in Christ became the hallmark of the church.

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

Gospel unity created racial harmony.

Old Problem

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

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

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

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

It's a long, sad story.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The chasm between believers widens.

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

What if we could take a step in that direction?

A Starting Point

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Hopeful Journey

Learning the language of lament is a journey.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One Voice

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

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

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

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

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

Lament is where we can begin.

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

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

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

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

Come, weep with me.



LAMENT PRAYER

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

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

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

In the name of Jesus, our King. Amen.

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

Discussion Questions

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