

WENDY ALSUP



CRYING OUT TO GOD

Experiencing Grace Through Psalms of Lament

AN 8-WEEK BIBLE
STUDY EXPERIENCE



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INTRODUCTION

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

MATTHEW 5:4

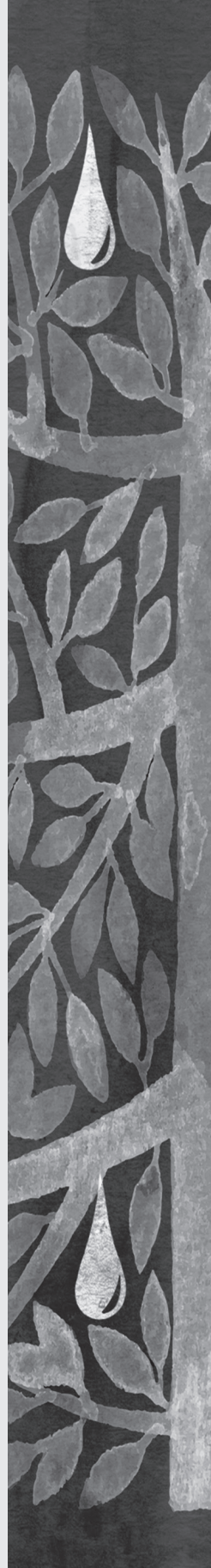
All is not right in our world today. Sometimes the pain and suffering in the world is right at our doorstep, in our faces, oozing through our homes and bodies. Other times, even when not facing obvious sources of suffering, many of us feel a low-level current of discouragement running in the background of our lives. Disappointment, demoralization, and cynicism infiltrate our days. If they haven't yet, they will.

However it manifests, *we all have something to mourn*. We are all daily affected by something that is wrong in the world, something that is not consistent with God's perfect creation in the Garden of Eden.

Where do you find yourself today? Are you mourning profound loss personally? Maybe you are walking with someone who is navigating deep grief. Perhaps, like myself and other close friends, you have experienced the loss of a loved one through death, and this loss is a haze that hovers over each moment of your day. Maybe your loved one still lives but has rejected God and you. Are you haunted by this person's memory instead of comforted by it?

Maybe you, like me, are facing debilitating illness. Do you labor to complete the bare minimum of tasks you need to do each day? Have you received a diagnosis that you grapple to make sense of? Do you have a child or loved one who is struggling emotionally, spiritually, or physically? We often carry the burdens and pain of those we love as if they are our own.

The list could go on and on. Perhaps your suffering, on a spectrum, does not seem as dark as others'. Even so, job stresses, financial issues, church strain, and family struggles can push us into a dark place where we wrestle with God and others. You don't have to compare your suffering to others to find help in this study; you don't even have to be aware of suffering in your



own life. Our stories and experiences of suffering are wide and varied. But grief and mourning are universal.

The disillusionment believers face around suffering leads to a host of questions: Why does God allow suffering into our lives and the lives of those we love? Why does suffering seem to come upon so many who do not deserve it, while those who perpetuate injustice seem to avoid consequences for the pain they have caused? Such questions over suffering, injustice, and the general unfairness of the world are oft-cited reasons for doubt, or even leaving the faith. How do we respond when these questions arise in us and in those we love? How do we maintain hope for others when they struggle to hope for themselves?

How do we maintain hope for *ourselves*?

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). Does Jesus’ assurance ring hollow to you? Suffering doesn’t feel like a blessing. In fact, it may feel as though it alienates you or your loved one from God. Such was the feeling of many writers God used to pen the chapters of the Bible we will be studying for the next eight weeks.

If God is good, why is my life bad? If God is light, why does my body seem consumed by darkness? If God is just, why am I experiencing long-term injustice? If God is love, why am I experiencing hate and betrayal? If God is life, why am I dying? If you haven’t personally wrestled with these questions, I guarantee you know someone who has. The writers of Scripture certainly wrestled with such questions.

The bottom line is that suffering can tempt believers to doubt what they know of God, his people, and his Word. If God, the church, and the Scriptures are good, why aren’t they good for me or my loved ones? We need something outside ourselves to ground us in Someone bigger than ourselves. We need to anchor to a rock that is heavier than our frame, that can hold us tight as we feel tossed about. Over the next eight weeks, we will use lament in Scripture to name the very real emotions we face as we suffer and to understand the character of our God who anchors us amid the emotional and physical storms suffering causes.

The word *lament* in the Bible simply means weeping or mourning. But the category of lament in the Scriptures is bigger than the mere word

suggests. Lament in the Psalms is more than grief or mourning, it is grief expressed *to God*. It is mourning in relationship with the God of the universe, and we find in the Scriptures that Christ shares this grief with us. We do not lament alone. God's Word, through its example of lament, helps us name our suffering and face it head-on.

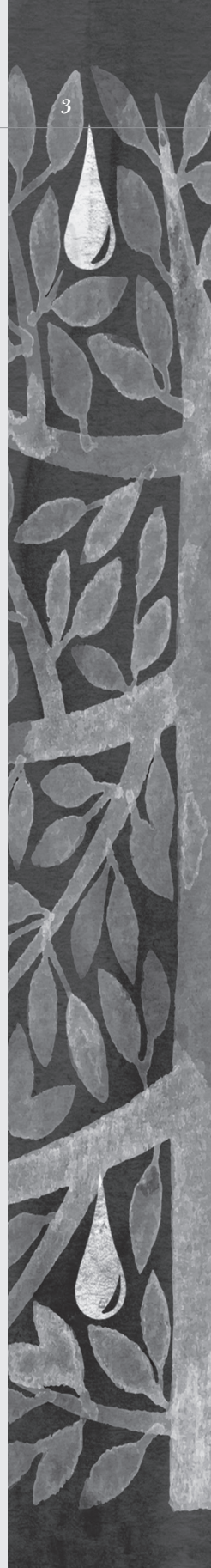
Psalms of lament generally begin with an acknowledgment of God, move quickly into raw complaint, and end with hope in the unchanging character and glory of God that secures us in the storm. The foundational thought that will anchor us each week of this study is that the act of lament—that is, the expression and experience of bringing our complaints to God as he models for us in the Scriptures—is a means of God's grace. It is a channel through which God gifts us the help to persevere and the hope for our times of struggle.

Some of us may not particularly want to open the heavy gate that guards us from dark emotions over suffering in our world. Be encouraged as we explore the deep emotions and questions suffering provokes: The Holy Spirit groans with us when we have no words, bringing our needs before the Father in prayer (Romans 8:26). God pays “attention to the prayer of the destitute and will not despise their prayer” (Psalm 102:17). God keeps track of our sorrows and collects our tears (Psalm 56:8). The last scene of Scripture in Revelation has God wiping the tears gently from our faces with his own hand. Though ignoring the dark thoughts suffering provokes may provide temporary peace, there is a deeper, better peace to be had when we face suffering head-on and bring our dark emotions and questions directly to God.

For the next eight weeks, join me in exploring the dark, the hard, the *wrong* with this world. Name it before the Lord and allow God through the Scriptures to meet you in it, that you may find grace in your time of need, your community's time of need, and our world's time of need. God has not left us to journey through our dark emotions alone.

*I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, and he will hear me.*

PSALM 77:1





HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Whether you are engaging in this study with a large group, a small group, in a coffee shop with a friend, or by yourself in your favorite chair, here are some helpful suggestions.

FOR THE GROUP SESSION

Set aside a designated day and time for a weekly gathering—in person or virtually—for the next eight weeks. The content (video and discussion) will take about an hour, but I recommend allowing some additional time for a check-in or to share prayer requests.

The videos are accessed through the QR code in the book. These videos were created with a group in mind—that you would watch the video together and then immediately engage in the content that follows. But it also means that individuals still have access, which is nice if someone has to miss a group gathering.

A few tips on engaging in a group discussion:

- Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will moderate the conversation, and it helps them to have willing participants.
- Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate, but also make space for the insight of others.
- Be sensitive to other members of the group. Listen attentively and ask follow up questions when appropriate. You might be surprised by others' insights!
- Stick to the topic being discussed and try to avoid “rabbit trails.”
- Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

If you have time, a good check-in question might be to name a highlight from the previous week of study—either from the group session or individual days. This study was designed so that you can still participate in the Group Session even if you haven't done all the homework, but—of course—I hope you'll still want to engage with everything!

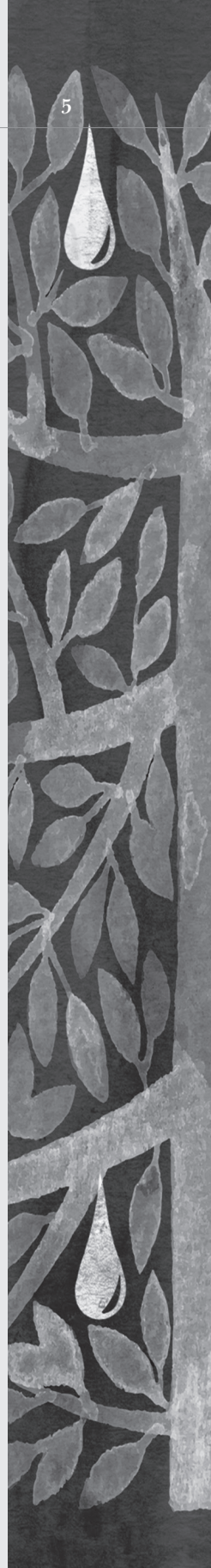
FOR THE INDIVIDUAL DAYS

Following the Group Session are five days of content for you to engage with during the week between group gatherings. I believe you will find the content meaningful but not overwhelming, and it's designed to fit into your normal, everyday life.

A few tips for engaging in individual study and reflection:

- Have a designated Bible you use for this study that you are willing to mark up. If you don't have one, you can always print off and mark up each week's psalm individually. Most of the Scripture I reference is taken from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
- As you begin each day, there are prompts to invite God to speak to you through his Word. Prayer and Bible reading are the most important part of each day's study. Don't rush past them.
- Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding.
- At the end of each day, thank God for what you have learned and pray about any applications that have come to mind.

Though written thousands of years ago, Scripture is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), and God still speaks through it today. May God speak to you through his Word in this study in ways that are *helpful* and *hopeful* as you navigate suffering in your life and community.





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WEEK ONE | HELP, LORD— PSALM 12

Group Session Introduction

For the next eight weeks, we will look at how Scripture helps us articulate our grief, encompassing everything from sadness or distress to anguished suffering. We will learn to speak that grief—and groan when we do not have words—to the One who carries the weight of suffering with and for us. We will discover the supernatural help he gives us as we cry out to him over the wounds we bear.

Hebrews 4:16 is a key passage with our overarching theme for the next eight weeks:



Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.

Watch this week's video.



DISCUSSION

Before we begin our study of psalms of lament, it may be helpful to recognize our own experience of suffering and the tension we have felt with God and other Christians because of it. With respect for the varying degrees with which each group member feels free to share, discuss these questions and learn more about one another.

- We have defined *suffering* as “our groaning under the weight of humanity’s fall.” Keeping this definition in mind, what kinds of suffering have you seen in your community? In our nation? In the world?
- What hurtful responses have you witnessed to suffering in your community?
- What helpful, compassionate responses to suffering have you seen or experienced?



- How have you observed others dealing with their own suffering, in both helpful and harmful ways?
- Consider not why you are suffering, but what suffering looks like in your life. How can suffering affect us mentally, emotionally, and relationally?
- How can suffering cause us to question the church, the Scriptures, or God himself?
- Read Hebrews 4:16. What does its truth teach us about the purpose of lament?
- Read Hebrews 2:10. This passage refers to Jesus as the pioneer in our suffering. Like a Coast Guard ice cutter ship, Jesus plowed ahead of us through unknown territory, clearing the way for those who followed. Sometimes we feel like pioneers in our suffering, alone as we trailblaze through unfamiliar paths. How can thinking of Jesus as the pioneer and trailblazer ahead of us be an encouragement in suffering?

This week, as we consider Psalm 12, we will find that creation, God the Spirit, and God the Son all groan *with us* under the weight of all that is wrong in the world after the fall. Be encouraged that God has not left us alone to carry these weights by ourselves.

In the closing prayer, bring the following to God:

- The spiritual tension raised by the types of suffering mentioned in the discussion.
- Thanks that Jesus has gone through suffering ahead of us.
- Praise for the grace and mercy God promises us in these hard days.

I AM INTRIGUED by the word *groan*. It points to a response to our trials that precedes and transcends words. I need and want to cry out to God, but I can't articulate a word. I have groaned: in the waiting area of a psychiatric ward. In the ICU after cancer surgery. On the floor of my living room after signing divorce papers. In my car in the wake of a church conflict I didn't see coming. I groaned and cried out to God with grief and fear I couldn't put into words.



We are all affected by suffering—in our homes, our communities, and our world. And our hearts cry out because we know this is not how things are supposed to be! In the opening video, I defined *suffering* as our groaning under the weight of humanity's fall. We can read in Genesis 3 how God created a perfect world and placed Adam and Eve in the middle of it with the words "It was good." But Satan tempted Adam and Eve to disbelieve and disobey God. They did, and as a result everything broke. Sin, sickness, broken relationships, and death entered the world, and humanity has groaned under this weight ever since.

The problems that came into the world after the fall are deep and pervasive. They extend through our bodies, hearts, and the world around us. The weight of humanity's fall on our lives is real. There is no value in pretending it doesn't exist, and the Bible doesn't demand we make peace with it. Instead, Scripture tells us that as we groan, all of creation groans with us.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. Not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:22-23)

Today, as we begin our look at lament in Scripture, we will find help to name the things about which we groan and to bring them to God in prayer.

First, what is lament?

The simplest definition of *lament* is "weeping" or "mourning." We associate words like *weeping* and *mourning* with grief, a significant aspect of lament. It is more than grief, though; it is grief expressed—technically, a complaint. But it's also more than a complaint. What makes lament so

unique is that it is grief and complaint expressed to God. It is weeping and mourning in relationship *with God*. Remarkably, God does not abandon us in our pain. And in fact, he welcomes our lament and shares in our suffering.

Most psalms of lament follow a pattern of turning to God in despair, pouring out a complaint, and concluding with a declaration of trust in God. This week, Psalm 12 will guide our lament. It will give us language to name what is wrong with the world, and why it makes sense that we groan.

You will read through the psalm slowly three times. Pray before and between each reading: *Lord, open my eyes to your supernatural help through this psalm. Help me to name the emotional, spiritual, and physical struggles I face in this pervasively broken world.*

On your first two readings, try to take in the entire psalm. Then on the third reading, note words or phrases that stand out to you. You might notice words that reveal the world's brokenness. You might notice words that describe God's character and response. Or maybe you notice something else. Circle any phrases that stand out to you. (If you'd prefer, there is also space below to list those words and phrases.)

READ PSALM 12.

- Look back through the words and phrases you identified. Which phrases describe results of the fall that you are experiencing personally right now? How have you experienced unfaithfulness, disloyalty, or lies against you or God?

- In verse 5, the psalmist says that God sees the devastation of the needy, and he responds to the groans of the poor. If you have felt something too deep for words under the weight that you carry, describe that feeling.

- I'm convinced that the more suffering we experience in life, the fewer words we possess to articulate it. After all, what words are there that could possibly ease our pain? And so we groan.

“Because of the devastation of the needy
and the groaning of the poor,
I will now rise up,” says the LORD.

“I will provide safety for the one who longs for it.” (Psalm 12:5)

This verse is a sweet help to us as we groan under our own weight of suffering. Notice how God *doesn't* respond—he doesn't rebuke the groaning of the needy. He does not tell them to have more faith, nor does he characterize their groans as sinful complaints. Instead, God says he will arise and provide safety in response to their groans.

Today, in closing, I invite you to face head-on the emotional, physical, and spiritual weights you carry because of the world's brokenness. In the space below or in a journal, write out whatever words you have now for God, and groan without words what you cannot yet articulate. Through this study, Scripture will help you name your struggles more specifically.

*For he has not despised
or abhorred
the torment of the oppressed.
He did not hide his
face from him
but listened when he
cried to him for help.*

PSALM 22:24

TODAY, WE WILL READ Psalm 12:1-5 again. But today's focus is on the first element of biblical lament: the initial turning to God. Remember, lament has an honest quality to it.

PSALM 12:1-5

**DAY
2**



The mourning and crying sound like complaints because they are. When the complaint is directed to God, the Creator of the universe who holds all of time in his hands, then it becomes lament.

Our usual practice will be to pray, asking God to open our eyes to his help to us in Scripture, and then to read our passage three times slowly. Pray between each reading: *Father in heaven, open my eyes to your help for me through this psalm of lament. On the third reading, note words or phrases that stand out to you.*

READ PSALM 12:1-5.

- As you read today, what words or phrases stood out to you? Was there anything new that you didn't note yesterday?

Notice David's opening words, "Help, LORD." Because it's such a simple phrase, it's easy to gloss over it. *Yet directing our complaint directly to God is the most essential element of biblical lament.* Have you struggled in your life with turning to God with your complaints?

My husband experienced the onset of symptoms of schizophrenia in 2012 and divorced me in 2015. My children were nine and eleven years old at the time. In those two sentences lie years of painful, confusing days trying to understand and navigate the circumstances devastating my family. I had dear friends in town and out of town whom I called regularly when I needed to process what was happening, usually at least once a day. But I noticed over time that it was only when none of my friends were available that I would finally be forced to turn to God.



After David cries to God, he lays out his complaint, which we will explore tomorrow. But for now, take a closer look at how God responds in verse 5.

“Because of the devastation of the needy
and the groaning of the poor,
I will now rise up,” says the LORD.
“I will provide safety for the one who longs for it.”

- What stands out to you about God’s response to David’s cry?

I am struck that it was not David’s poetic words that caused God to rise up; it was the devastation of the needy and the groaning of the poor. The devastated don’t need fancy prayers—which is good, because at my worst points it has been beyond me to articulate anything coherent to God. And as we saw in day one, God doesn’t rebuke our groanings. But even when we have no words, God receives and acts upon our simple cries.

As we close today, I will give you words to pray, but you can know you do not need words to bring your pain to God. Pray with words or simply groan. Either way, he hears and responds to our prayers directed to him.

Lord, I need your help today. My family needs your help. My community needs your help. My church needs your help. Sin and suffering have devastated so much. Deliver me, my family, and my church. Help us to persevere and hope. Thank you that you hear my groaning even when I cannot articulate all that I need.

We have read through all or part of Psalm 12 around six times, but there is more in David's cry to God. We are going to read part of it again. Pray between each reading: *Father, help me through your Scriptures today. Open my eyes to aid I have not yet seen in my previous readings.* On your third reading, note anything new that stands out to you that you had not focused on before.

PSALM 12:1-5**DAY
3****READ PSALM 12:1-5.**

- What stood out to you today in this reading?

I am struck by the psalmist's language of betrayal. Loyalty had disappeared from the earth. In David's view of the moment, no one remained faithful. Everyone said what they thought David wanted to hear to his face, while conspiring his demise behind his back. Psalm 12 is often related chronologically to the events of 2 Samuel 15–16. That passage tells the story of King David's son Absalom who revolted against him. David was betrayed by his own son and by close advisors who sided with his son against him. This was devastating to David and many around him.

David was climbing the slope of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he ascended. His head was covered, and he was walking barefoot. All the people with him covered their heads and went up, weeping as they ascended. (2 Samuel 15:30)

- How have you, your loved one, or your community experienced disloyalty, betrayal, or unfaithfulness? What was the fallout in your life or in the community's life?

Disloyalty. Betrayal by family and close friends. Unfaithfulness to a committed relationship. All are ultimately results of Adam and Eve's first sin. Back in the Garden of Eden, Adam turned on his wife, flesh of his flesh. He threw her under the bus the moment God questioned him about his sin (Genesis 3:12). Betrayal and disloyalty have marred personal relationships ever since, and they still devastate us when they show up in our lives.

And we groan.

David groaned particularly over the betrayal he faced by trusted friends and family. Betrayals in our biological or spiritual families are particularly devastating.

- Why is unfaithfulness in a trusted relationship so devastating emotionally and/or spiritually?

I will never forget the day my husband brought home divorce papers from a lawyer and handed them to me to fill out (I didn't). We had made vows to one another in front of God and family that, in my head at least, bound us together for life. We had forged our life together through many hard seasons financially, physically, and spiritually. Each season seemed to bring us together more strongly.

He was my safe person. Though he had been resistant to taking medications for the symptoms of schizophrenia he experienced, on the day he handed me the divorce papers, he seemed fully in control of himself. That moment broke something in me I'm not sure I'll ever fully recover from in this life.

In Psalm 12, God offers us solidarity for such moments and invites us to pour out our devastation to him for help and deliverance. The psalmist reminds us that God will provide safety—in all the places and circumstances that have made us feel unsafe. As we close today, I invite you to bring directly to God the situations of betrayal, disloyalty, and unfaithfulness you have faced. Name the harm done to you or your loved ones. Ask God for help, salvation, deliverance, and safety. Write out your prayer below.

TODAY, WE WILL READ Psalm 12:5-8.

Remember the form that laments tend to take: an initial calling out to God, then complaint to God over the brokenness of the world, followed

by affirmations of God's character and trust in him. For many of us, it will take longer than a few verses to move from complaint to trust, and we will look at psalms in this study that do not resolve so easily. Psalm 12 holds this classic pattern, but it too ends with a somber reflection of things that remain wrong in this world. It is okay if you are not yet at the place of trusting God as David did in these verses, but perhaps reading his words will help you know what is possible through the gift of lament.

Using the same practice as before, first pray and ask God for help to trust him through this psalm. Then read it three times slowly, noting words or phrases that stand out to you on your final reading.

READ PSALM 12:5-8.



- How do you understand the language of verse 6? Rephrase it in your own words.

God's words are pure, and they are helpful. You can count on, hold on to, and trust the words God says in Scripture. This affirmation is meaningful to me. I was deeply broken by my spouse's betrayal of our vows, breaking his word to me. I have come to be very sensitive about this in my family, sitting down my boys and ex-husband (who remains in our lives as my children's father) recently to ask simply, "Please don't tell me you are going to do something you aren't going to do. Just tell me you don't want to do it." Every new time someone tells me something to my face without planning to follow through exposes old wounds in my heart. When David cries out against betrayal, lying, and unfaithfulness, I feel it deeply. As a result, when David affirms the ultimate purity and faithfulness of God's words, it is a balm to my parched soul.

Others may speak flippantly with no thought of following through. But God's words are tested and pure. Lying is antithetical to his character. When God says he will rise up and provide safety for the one who longs for it, he will surely do it.

- How have others hurt you by being unfaithful to their word?

- How does God’s faithfulness help you navigate betrayal?

As we close, pray through the passage we read, personalizing it as a response to God.

God, you see our devastation and hear our groaning. You promise to rise up and provide safety to us who long for it. I long for it, God! The psalmist says your words are the purest of pure. Others have lied and not kept their promises. But your promises are tried and true. I am wounded by the ways others have broken their word to me. Help me believe that I can count on your words.

DAY
5

**ROMANS 8:26 AND
HEBREWS 4:15-16**

IN THIS STUDY, we are guided by several principles that have already been at play in Psalm 12. First, we are not alone in our suffering. The psalms of

lament are just one of many places in Scripture we find solidarity when we are experiencing suffering that feels deeply alienating. Further in our study, Job, Joseph, Hagar, and other psalmists like Asaph also offer us companionship in our suffering.

But it isn’t just other humans who suffer with us: Christ himself suffers with us. And in Romans 8:26, we see that God the Holy Spirit groans with us when we have no words. It is an amazing comfort to know that we are not left to navigate our suffering by ourselves and that Christ himself suffers with us.



- You and I groan under the weights we carry. We groan before we even have words to name our pain. We groan when words aren't enough. Have you had a time of suffering when you couldn't form words to name it or explain it? How were your prayers affected?

- How do you respond to the truth that God the Spirit groans with us?

The third principle that guides us in this study is that when we have no words, God gives us words through lament and stories of suffering in Scripture. Have you ever been in a session with a counselor or therapist and they named something you were experiencing that you couldn't quite explain on your own? It is powerful to have help to name what we are feeling or experiencing. And that is exactly what the Scriptures we are studying will do for us.

- What does it feel like when someone helps you name an emotion or struggle that you had a hard time explaining?

As we close this week, know that you do not suffer alone. *God is with you.* Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was tempted as we are, and he is not unaffected by our suffering. He, in fact, has made a way for us to bring our suffering to God's throne room, even when it is simply groaning too deep for words.

But God also—as the one who knows us best—offers us help through the Scriptures, to name what we are feeling, the sins against us, and the pain of its aftermath. Through naming our struggle and turning toward God in complaint, we find unexpected grace and mercy to see us through with hope.

Envision yourself in the throne room of God, and hear his words of grace and mercy to you from Psalm 12.

“Because of the devastation of the needy
and the groaning of the poor,
I will now rise up,” says the LORD.
“I will provide safety for the one who longs for it.”
The words of the LORD are pure words,
like silver refined in an earthen furnace,
purified seven times.
You, LORD, will guard us;
you will protect us from this generation forever.

Now sit before the Lord in prayer, without words if needed, knowing that you do not sit alone. The Holy Spirit groans with us. God is not unaffected by your suffering. He has not left you alienated to groan under the weight of this world alone.

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