

EXCERPT



Walking with God Through the Valley *Recovering the Purpose of Biblical Lament*

January 7, 2025 | \$28, 200 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0396-1

What does it mean for the church to recover the biblical practice of lament? Drawing deeply from key passages in Scripture, Old Testament scholar May Young offers a guide for readers to gain deep understanding of lament texts and grow a true practice of lament that helps us move through pain and suffering to experience God's renewed hope.

The Purpose of Lament

Whether we are currently experiencing pain or witnessing others go through it, we recognize that life is far from perfect. Dark times are inevitable and often lurking around the corner. If we live long enough, we all face suffering in one form or another.

Our own lives mirror the story of Scripture, which quickly unfolds as a story that moves through moments of deep grief and loss with hope. Genesis attributes this broken state to the fall of humanity, depicted in Genesis 3. Through the events that transpired in the Garden of Eden, our world became subject to sin and along with it suffering and alienation. Not only did humankind incur the judgments pronounced there by God, but we now experience shame, fear, and loneliness. We know that Jesus' work on the cross has provided us hope beyond the grave, but now we experience life with God in an imperfect world that is full of sin and suffering. If we are honest, sometimes the future hope of our faith does not bring us the comfort we so desperately desire when we are going through suffering. We read Scripture and know that joy comes in the morning, but that does not make the ache of our souls dissipate. Whether shame from pain we have caused others or suffering we experience because of some external wrong thrust on us without our consent, these feelings of sadness, grief, and guilt can often linger with no foreseeable end. This is where lament comes in. Lament helps us to engage with God now, as we await our future hope.

Practically speaking, lament is a multifaceted means God has graciously provided to help us process the brokenness and fallen state of the world that we reside in, whether experienced through pain, loss, suffering, sickness, sin, or injustice. Lament has various functions that move us toward healing and wholeness. This chapter will focus specifically on the purposes of lament in the following three general categories: to give voice to our pain, to provide an avenue to engage God, and ultimately to lead us into greater hope.

Lament enables us to process our suffering. One of the primary ways this is accomplished is through acknowledgment, because we cannot deal with what we do not acknowledge. Throughout the Old Testament and especially in the Psalms, we observe raw expressions of pain, disappointment, confusion, doubt, hatred, and even anger. There is no fronting or faking here. Scripture shows us that only when we are honest can we deal with the issues that are burdening us. Too many of us would rather sweep things under the rug or keep ourselves busy so we do not have to face the ugliness that arises in our hearts. We are quick to tell people that we are fine when we really are not. Perhaps we do not want to confront our issues because it is too painful, or perhaps we fear judgment from others or think it is unspiritual to let others see our struggles.

When I was teaching a seminary course in Hong Kong on this topic, some of the church leaders who attended the class confided that they would not let their church members see them struggle because they feared being judged. Some of them had actually experienced judgment and were ostracized for being honest. Unfortunately, they are not alone, and this is not limited to churches overseas.

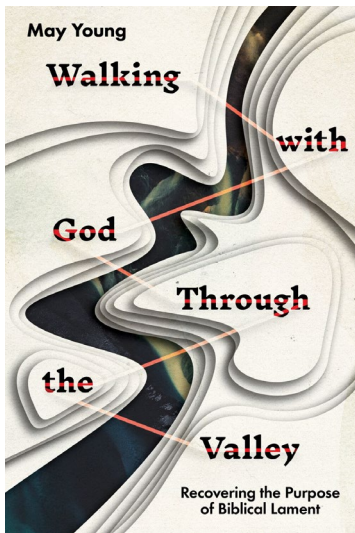
Many pastors also perpetuate the idea that it is inappropriate to be friends with congregation members, which contributes to the internal divide they experience between what they portray to others and their true selves. For some reason, Christians have equated spirituality with always being happy, in control, or fine. I have often heard people say, "I don't want to go to church today because I am not feeling up to it." Do we think that we must be in a certain positive or capable state to be able to go to church? Do we believe that being happy and content honors God more? Or perhaps we are reacting the way Adam and Eve did



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when they hid from God because they felt ashamed. When we read the Bible, we find that we are in the company of friends when we suffer. Mary the mother of Jesus has to watch her own son die. Joseph is sold into slavery by his own brothers. Job experiences tremendous loss and physical suffering. Elijah suffers from depression and loneliness, and the apostle Paul experiences both inner and outer turmoil because of his ministry. Let us remember that God does not expect us to come to him as perfected people who are competent and qualified; he wants to meet us in our struggle and pain. Matthew 11:28 says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Ironically, when we silence our pain and doubts, we weaken rather than strengthen our faith. Faith is not displayed in the soul that does not struggle. Biblical faith is one that is strengthened more through trials than through well-being. Suffering is often a process of refinement that purifies us and brings to the surface our true emotions, sins, fears, and doubts. Instead of suppressing or covering these emotions, we need to learn to be honest. We must be people who are willing to say that we are not okay and live authentically before God, ourselves, and others. We must be willing to grieve our losses and pain openly. This is very biblical. We see in Acts 8:2 that "devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him" (ESV). Paul and his companions also express deep sorrow over the prospect of never being together again in Acts 20:38: "What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again." When we acknowledge our pain, even if it is temporary, we create space for God and others to enter into healing with us.

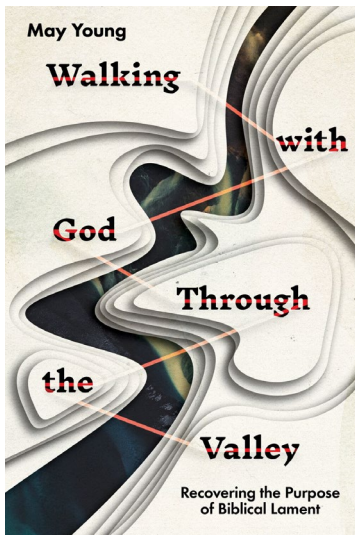
—Taken from chapter four, "The Purpose of Lament"



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May Young (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is associate professor of biblical studies and chairs the Department of Biblical Studies, Christian Ministries, Intercultural Studies, and Philosophy at Taylor University. She has contributed to several volumes focused on lament, including *Reading the Psalms Theologically* (Lexham) and *World Christianity and COVID-19: Discourses and Perspective* (Routledge). She is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and the Society of Biblical Literature and serves on the board of directors of the Institute of Biblical Research, as well as the editorial board for *Sacred Roots*.

Recovering the Practice of Lament

"A fantastic book! Not only do we learn more about lament, but we are propelled through personal examples to practice lament individually and communally. May this book help the church recover lament as a central part of life with God."

—**Andrew Abernethy**, professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College

"*Walking with God Through the Valley: Recovering the Purpose of Biblical Lament* is a carefully woven tapestry centered on an undervalued but oh-so essential thread of life—lament. Dr. Young skillfully amplifies the promised healing and liberation revealed when we lean into personal and communal lament. Readers will see that recovering biblical lament avails us to the healing, humility, and hindsight our soul longs to posture."

—**Lori E. Banfield**, lecturer of psychology and practical theology at Eastern University and author of *Walking Worthy of My Calling: Journey Back to the Likeness of God*

"May Young's book speaks to the heart, the head, and the hands. This book shows how lament addresses a profound need in the church and in our lives to share our deepest and hardest feelings with God. Young combines meaningful stories of pain, loss, and hope with solid biblical insights about the history and theology of lament, its place in the Bible, and its purpose in our lives today. By offering reflection questions and suggestions for individual and corporate lament practices, every reader is encouraged to participate. This book will be a valuable gift to students and congregations alike!"

—**Beth Stovell**, professor of Old Testament and chair of general theological studies at Ambrose University in Alberta, Canada

"In this stimulating and accessible study, May Young explores the misunderstood and underused genre of lament in the Bible with an eye to making lament come to life for both individuals and the corporate church as a whole. Drawing on her own personal experiences of loss, frustration, and anger, she shows that laments are not merely about 'sadness,' but that they can be a rich resource in many different situations, including sin and repentance, doubt, anger, loneliness, sickness and pain, death and loss. Her title well captures the running thread that she traces through the laments: that God walks with us throughout, and we are not alone. I highly recommend this book!"

—**David M. Howard, Jr.**, professor of Old Testament at Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota

"Dr. May Young has given us a rare book on lament in the Old Testament which is biblically grounded and pastorally wise. She writes not only as a scholar of the subject but also as a practitioner who shares movingly from her own experiences and those of fellow sufferers. Every spiritual leader should read this book to walk more closely with God in times of trouble!"

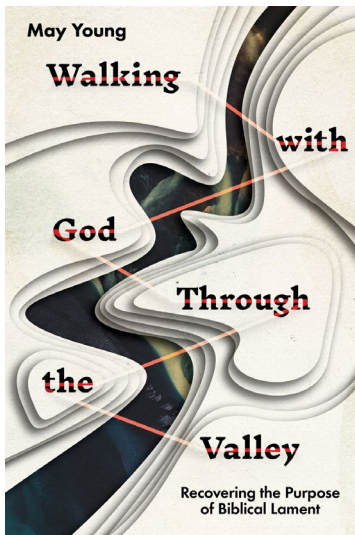
—**Jerry Hwang**, associate professor of theology at Trinity Christian College



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"With a distinctive combination of academic expertise and pastoral sensitivity, Dr. May Young offers the church a great gift: an invitation and guide to the practice of lament. This is a clear, readable, and compassionate book, and it will offer comfort to those who are grieving and wisdom for those who walk alongside them."

—**Aubrey E. Buster**, associate professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College

"This book is a captivating introduction to the concept of biblical lament. May Young achieves a brilliant feat in explaining to the reader—especially the reader unfamiliar with this concept—lament's nature, function, and purpose and the need for the practice of lament in the church today. Speaking from her heart, May shares snippets of her own experience and that of others in order to show how lament can bring people closer to God. Her pastoral concern and desire to help believers discover and embrace the power of lament in the midst of incomprehensible suffering is noticeable throughout the book."

—**Yacouba Sanon**, assistant professor of Old Testament at Alliance Theological Seminary in Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa

"This is the book on lament that we've been waiting for and need. May Young merges her extensive study on biblical lament with profoundly personal applications for the individual and the community. The practice of lament is the missing link for many in healing from suffering, trauma, and pain. Young guides us through an understanding of biblical lament as a way forward, a guide to process with God the injustices and sorrows of life. Her work is timely, honest, and accessible."

—**Ingrid Faro**, professor of Old Testament at Northern Seminary

"May Young's *Walking with God Through the Valley* makes a distinctive contribution to the literature on lament. Her sensitive, comprehensive look at the many faces of sorrow and suffering offers a fresh, accessible resource for dealing with times of anguish, both in our worshipping communities and in private devotions. Dr. Young's scholarship and depth of personal experience provide an insightful guide for dealing with the raw realities of life in a way that brings renewed understanding of God's goodness and steadfast love. Her book will benefit and encourage readers in both church and academy."

—**Dennis R. Magary**, professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School



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