

"Aubrey Sampson is a fresh voice  
when your broken heart needs a fresh wind."

ANN VOSKAMP, *New York Times* bestselling author

*the*  
louder  
song

Listening  
for Hope  
*in the* Midst  
of Lament



aubrey sampson

Aubrey Sampson is a fresh voice when your broken heart needs a fresh wind. Lean into these pages and you'll hear the beauty of the Louder Song—that your soul is desperately longing to hear.

ANN VOSKAMP, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Broken Way* and *One Thousand Gifts*

There's no denying we live in a fallen, broken, and sinful world—a world of pain—where suffering is a reality for all of us at various levels. Aubrey Sampson peels away the layers of pretense that often masquerade as outward strength or valor as she unpacks an expressive theology of lament. Anchored by her own faith journey and experience of personal loss and suffering, Aubrey encourages authenticity and fosters hope for those who are in the midst of pain and suffering. I am confident this book will be of great encouragement to you as you reflect on the experiences of lament in a world of suffering.

ED STETZER, PHD, Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College and executive director of the Billy Graham Center

If you want permission to ask God the hard questions about suffering, Sampson extends an embossed invitation. Here she offers a highly accessible tour of the lost art of biblical lament, teaching along the way with utmost pastoral care—and with just enough vulnerability to persuade hurting readers that their guide is trustworthy. One certain outcome: You will never look at snow globes the same way again.

ANDY OLSEN, managing editor of *Christianity Today*

In this vulnerable account of her own pain, Aubrey Sampson helps us believe that life can be hard . . . and God can still be good. Anchored in Scripture and enlivened by storytelling, this powerful book makes something lyrical of lament. And I suppose this, too, is a mystery—that the most beautiful songs are often born out of suffering. *The Louder Song* will be a pleasure to recommend and reread.

JEN MICHEL, author of *Surprised by Paradox*

This is a beautiful book. It is real about lament and honest about suffering, but not without hope. With reflections on lament that are both deeply personal and guided by Scripture, *The Louder Song* composes a harmonious tune that will be restorative music to the ears of anyone who has felt isolated, unknown, or hopeless in their pain. Emily Dickinson once wrote, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers— / That perches in the soul— / And sings the tune without the words— / And never stops—at all—.” The buoyancy of enduring, Christ-filled, soul-stirring hope, even in the midst of pain, comes through in Aubrey Sampson’s transparent and evocative writing. This is a song you’ll want to put on repeat.

BRETT McCracken, senior editor at The Gospel Coalition and author of *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community*

If you are in the middle of deep hurt, *The Louder Song* is a powerful reminder of how God meets us in the middle of our pain and reminds us we have victory through him. Aubrey’s story is a personal lesson in how to pass through disappointment and pain without getting stuck there.

CHRISTINE CAINE, bestselling author and founder of The A21 Campaign and Propel Women

*The Louder Song: Listening for Hope in the Midst of Lament* is a rare book written with honest, raw emotion about experiencing life's most challenging times. Aubrey Sampson uses stories from her life and Scripture to remind us it's okay to cry out to God when we don't understand. If you're going through a challenging time right now or trying to help someone who is, this book is for you!

DAVE FERGUSON, lead pastor at Community Christian Church, coauthor of *Hero Maker: Five Essential Practices for Leaders to Multiply Leaders*

Having walked through suffering in my own life and with others, I know how tempting it can be to skip right past the hard stuff—and how much we miss out on if we do. In this book, Aubrey Sampson perfectly articulates the beauty of lament and offers it as a gift to anyone who has ever cried out to God—and to the church—in their pain. Through her own story and keen insights, she helps readers learn how to walk through grief while remaining anchored in hope.

JAMIE D. ATEN, PHD, founder and executive director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College and author of *A Walking Disaster: What Surviving Katrina and Cancer Taught Me about Faith and Resilience*

If you have ever felt the weight of pain pulling hard at your body and soul—and I know you have—there is solace in these pages. Aubrey teaches us not to hide from pain but to look it in the face, hard and long, and *lament* . . . and, in the depth of this hard, honest song, to find the Louder Song—the presence of the Comforter.

CATHERINE McNIEL, author of *Long Days of Small Things*

A book written from the mind reaches a mind; a book written from the heart reaches a heart; and a book written from a life reaches a life. This book is a life reacher. Aubrey invites us to hold the suffering of life and the sovereignty of God together with both hands.

TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD, author of *And Life Comes Back* and *You Can Do This*

What does a person who believes in a good and powerful God do with unimaginable pain . . . and seemingly stone-cold silence from heaven? Aubrey Sampson, from Scripture and experience, says we must lament. Not to find answers, but to “be still in the unanswerable.” Not to force God’s hand, but to be intimately “tethered to his presence.” *The Louder Song* gives hope that in the midst of life-shattering wounds, God sees us and invites us to cry out—raw and real—to him. In response, he comes close, walking with us through our pain, until the day when pain is no more. A must-read!

KEVIN BUTCHER, author of *Choose and Choose Again: The Brave Act of Returning to God’s Love*

I’m celebrating this book on lament. Don’t we all need better ways of grieving? Don’t we need a better understanding of suffering? Aubrey dives deep into the Scriptures and returns with a biblical map and a voice I shall return to again and again.

LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS, editor of *The Wonder Years: 40 Women over 40 on Aging, Faith, Beauty, and Strength*; author of *Crossing the Waters: Following Jesus through the Storms, the Fish, the Doubt, and the Seas*

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*The Louder Song: Listening for Hope in the Midst of Lament*

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*For Kevin, Eli, Lincoln, and Nolan—*

*In life's game changes, you have always carried me home.*

*You are living vavs in times of ekah. Thank you. I love you.*





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*Be Immanuel inside that sacred, hurting place,  
even if it's for only a few precious moments.*

**MICHAEL CARD**, *A Sacred Sorrow*

*The weight of this sad time we must obey;  
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.*

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**, *King Lear*



# foreword

AS I WRITE THIS, I'm sitting in a cushioned Starbucks booth in the Charlotte, North Carolina, airport. I've been here before. In this exact spot. About three years ago. And I'm overwhelmed by how much my life has changed in that short span of a thousand days.

I just spent two hours on a plane from Minneapolis, reading Aubrey's words and searching for just the right thing to say to draw *you* into your own lamenting process with Aubrey as your guide. I want to do a bang-up job introducing you to her, because I so believe in the power of Aubrey Sampson's pen! With her scintillating speaking style and her knack for telling an ordinary story in such an extraordinary way, she has certainly made this mentor proud of her, so writing this foreword would be my opportunity to make *her* proud of *me*.

But alas, I walked off the plane and realized my first draft would never work because I wrote it exclusively from my *professional* experience, explaining what I've witnessed as I've escorted *other people* through their painful epiphanies and raw realities. Working with women and couples through their

sexual hurts, habits, and hang-ups can provide some pretty rich fodder for writing. But it'd be inauthentic for me to play it safe, stay in my comfort zone, and just write about "other people's problems."

Truth be told, I've done a lot of lamenting of my own the past three years.

I've not wanted to "go there" in my public writings. Not yet. It's felt too fresh, the nerves too raw to dance around them just now. Which is perhaps why I bawled through everything I read on the plane, wiping the constant flow of tears from my eyelashes long enough to focus on one section at a time.

And now here I sit in this cushioned Starbucks booth, where *dread* and *fear* attempt to hold me back, yet *faith* and *hope* propel me forward. It feels bewildering how all of those negative and positive emotions are able to reside together simultaneously, as if "dread/fear" and "faith/hope" are completely unaware of how far apart on the "feel good" spectrum they are, oblivious to their polar-opposite nature. Or maybe that juxtaposition exists only in our minds. Maybe they've actually been intimate friends—no, *close relatives*—all along.

Even through a blurry stream of tears, I can clearly see this connection now. But I wouldn't have recognized it last time I sat here in this cozy booth, because that was *before*—before I faced a major health crisis in 2015, complete with shingles, pinched nerves, shot adrenal glands, and all kinds of stress-induced ailments . . . before my twenty-six-year marriage crumbled into a divorce I never thought would happen to us . . . before my hardworking, hardheaded dad committed

suicide on the second day of 2017 . . . before my beloved father-in-law lost his battle with cancer later that spring.

Within a dizzyingly short span of time, I'd lost three of the most important men in my life. Life's landscape kept shifting drastically. One loss after another, a succession of emotional sucker punches to the gut that wouldn't let up long enough for me to catch my breath.

And in case you are wondering—*yes*, I flailed about in all kinds of ways, trying to avoid feeling the full force of it all. (I suspect you probably have with a few flailing tactics of your own.)

I'm still processing, growing, and grieving with intention and purpose. I've learned not to stop—or apologize for—the tears. I've learned to be gentle with myself, accepting the fact that some afternoons, just lying on the couch and staring at the clouds is the only work that really needs to be accomplished. And I've learned that honoring our grievances is much like paying our taxes: They all come due eventually, and the longer we ignore them or attempt to medicate them with our flailings, the more penalties and interest accrue.

As I've reoriented my life around these fresh losses and attempted to press on day by day, well-meaning individuals have often proclaimed, "Oh, your ministry is about to *explode!*" I know they intend this as a compliment or encouragement, but sometimes I just want to scream, "Overwhelming grief is *not* my platform of choice!"

Most of us, if we're honest, would like to choose prettier platforms, lighter loads, easier circumstances, more glamorous roads to travel. We'd like to be the mom whose kids never

rebelled even a little bit and who writes about how to live a harmonious family life. Or the fitness instructor who coaches everyone toward looking their absolute best because *she* looks . . . well, you know . . . her absolute best. Or the money guru who's made a killing in the stock market and helps others learn how to invest wisely. Give me *that* kind of platform! But grief? *Good grief!*

Although I have no desire to make moving beyond grief and loss my next platform, I'm oh-so-grateful that Aubrey Sampson has decided to do just that. I've experienced firsthand over the past three years what grief does to a person physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, and I will tell you that none of us should ever attempt to brave this wilderness alone. Regardless of who we are or what other resources we may have access to, we all need to feel a connection to a trusted individual who's traveled the path ahead of us and can illuminate our way.

This book is Aubrey's road map for us all—well-crafted because it's been well-traveled. She is no stranger to pain, fear, anxiety, grief, loss, and all that comes part and parcel with these unwelcome intruders. And Aubrey is a guide you can rely on not to leave you in the lurch, stranded somewhere between shock and breathlessness. Her words of wisdom will put air back in your lungs and hope back in your heart.

*The Louder Song* can truly be just that—a melody above the noise of your grief, drawing your gaze up from the ground in the midst of the curveballs of life. You can stop repressing your pain. As you turn these pages and begin processing and expressing what you're feeling, my prayer

for you, dear reader, is that every ounce of dread and fear will organically evolve into deeper-than-ever levels of faith and hope in your life.

*Your partner in the journey,  
Shannon Ethridge*



# 1 when your game is changed

An Invitation  
to Lament and Hope

I SIT ON A BLACK LEATHER COUCH next to my husband, Kevin, in a grief-counselor's office. A box of Kleenex rests on a small coffee table in front of us. One of those framed pieces of coffee-shop art—a black-and-white photograph of rough-hewn hands holding coffee beans—hangs on the wall above us. Coffee and Kleenex, this office seems to say, will solve the world's problems. If only.

We've had a crazy last few years. In 2015, we opened the doors to our church plant, Renewal Church, just as my first book came out. We rejoiced, celebrating some tremendous movement of God in our lives and our neighborhood.

Then—the very same week—I woke up inexplicably unable to walk. I couldn't put any pressure on my legs whatsoever. For days, I scooted around our home like a dog scratching its hindquarters.

Assuming it was a running injury, I tried the old faithful: rest, ice, compression, elevation. No improvement. After a short hospitalization, I was able to walk again, thankfully. But this surprising illness-visitor has evolved into a long-term tenant. I now experience new health issues so disruptive that Kevin has, on more than one occasion, had to carry me around the house. I can't pull tissue from our counselor's box of Kleenex without much effort, let alone hold coffee beans in my palms without experiencing severe pain.

While I suffer from the physical discomfort of this mysterious illness, Kevin suffers too. He made that "in sickness" vow before God and all of our friends and family without really knowing what that might one day entail. Here it is—come to collect. Come to test if we are truly people of our vows.

As if that's not enough, there's also the unresolved search through Crater Lake, Oregon, for a loved one, my cousin and dear friend Cameron. Park rangers find remnants, clues: a coat, broken branches on the side of a cliff, snowshoe prints near a well-traveled photo spot—a place where many hikers before him have gone and returned safely. But not Cam. We hold his funeral in an airport hangar. Photos in lieu of a coffin. Unanswered questions instead of resolution.

And still this: our youngest son's developmental issues. His spinal-cord surgery and ongoing aftercare. His life-threatening allergies. Weeks at Lurie Children's, months of

therapy, years where my mama-fears have morphed from molehills into mountains.

And so the bad comes with the good, and it's all a bit too much to manage, contain, or make sense of. It feels like hell and heaven are having coffee together in my kitchen, secretly laughing about some inside joke. But I have no idea what's so funny.

I'd like to tell you that in the face of adversity, I rise above. I overcome. I more-than-conquer. Truthfully, I'm exhausted. And even *that* doesn't feel quite right. Exhaustion implies that at one point there *was* a commodity of energy to be used. And that there is hope for rest again in the future. But with my illness, along with the grief and fear that I currently carry, I can't foresee rest anytime soon. So it's not that I'm exhausted. It's that I'm done, numb, running on empty.

Is this spiritual attack or just my new reality? Life has become this thing I never thought it would. In my youthful naiveté, I believed that hardships were supposed to be the exception to life, not the rule. But suffering is not an exception, after all. It's not a surprise. It's not the interruption to an otherwise easy life. The older I get, the more I realize that no person is untouched by some level of pain and heartache, big or small. Get to know anyone deeply and you'll find their wounds.

Even though I know this fact—that everyone suffers—what's become especially apparent throughout this season is that there's some voice in my head, some combination of pastor/parent/professor/platitude that says I need to handle this suffering and *handle it well*. Learn whatever lesson God is trying to teach me so that I can graduate on to the next stage

of spiritual maturity. Be brave. Be strong. Be an example to others. Keep that chin up. Pass the test. Choose joy. Fake it till you make it. Smile.

So I try. I strive. I work excessively to prove how buoyant I can be in the face of adversity.

If a friend is in pain, I can be near her suffering without needing to fix it or clean it up. I'll spend hours listening and crying with her. I'll let her grieve and scream for as long as she needs to. I'm not afraid of sadness. But when it comes to my own pain, for some reason, I've responded differently.

I don't know how to hold these two opposing truths in my hands at the same time: Evil is evil, and God is good and in control over it all. I don't want to admit that I might have to learn to hold God's sovereignty and my own suffering in tension. I don't believe God is the agent of pain, evil, or death. But I don't know how to make sense of God *also* being the one who didn't stop pain, evil, or death from happening to me or those I love.

This is not an ontological argument about God and the existence of evil. I'm a real person, with real faith, wrestling with real pain, in my real-life setting. And it's very difficult. So in these early days of pain, I'm doing everything I can to avoid my conflicting emotions, to avoid reality—to prove how okay and optimistic I am. To keep the spotlight on the Good while ignoring the Bad.

Frankly, it's become absurd. I've become an absurd version of myself. For example, when I'm tempted to feel sad, I'll turn on some upbeat show tunes instead and sing along—loudly. Kevin has heard multiple renditions of “Don't Rain on My Parade” and “A Spoonful of Sugar.”

The problem is that no matter how loud I sing, how hard

I try to stay positive, my best efforts at “perky” can’t mask the fact that what I really long for are answers, reasons, meaning. Yet even that longing is conflicted and complicated because I also want to pretend that none of this is happening. I want to tie up my pain in a pretty little package. I want to place my suffering in a vacuum-sealed container and hide it under the bed with my skinny jeans and old journals—things I’m desperate to ignore.

But grief won’t be contained. Grief won’t stay hidden. Grief explodes. Though I know this, I try anyway—try to contain pain with pith. *Every cloud has as silver lining. Everything happens for a reason. Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before.* These are things I tell myself and anyone else who will listen. And I keep singing.

“She went full Broadway musical,” they’ll say in the documentary about my life, just before the scene where they show me going full Grey Gardens.

That’s a long way of telling you that Kevin and I should have called the grief therapist when I first started singing smash hits. We probably should have called when, though hounded by grief and illness, I continued to travel across the country to preach, speak, and give life to others; returning a hollow wife and mother, with not much left for my family.

We definitely should’ve called the therapist when Kevin said, “It’s like you’re running a marathon with one of your legs cut off, and that’s noble and all. But you’re expecting me and the boys to run with you, and we’re just standing here begging you to stop running altogether. But you can’t even hear us. You refuse to listen. Aubrey, we don’t want to carry your lifeless body across the finish line.”

We finally call the therapist the night that Kevin tries a direct approach, “You’re refusing to accept reality. Something has to give. I can’t do this anymore.”

We have doctors. We have accountability partners. We have close friends in ministry. But we need something more. We need a guide. We need a way through our new season of trial.

So here we are with Mark, the grief and life-change expert. Our thighs sticking to his leather couch, our hands wringing nervously; our shared grief and the coffee-bean art above us, creating an odd sort of cameo.

Mark begins with the dreaded question: “Why have you come in today?”

At which point Kevin passes me the box of Kleenex because at long last, instead of singing, I burst into tears. After a few moments of me blowing my nose, trying to gather my confused thoughts, Kevin senses that if anyone’s gonna start this conversation, it has to be him. He scratches his beard and thinks for a moment. “I don’t know what to tell you, Mark. The past few years have just . . . they’ve been a game changer.”

I nod in agreement. Kevin’s words feel right. Everything is different. Where there wasn’t one before, a demarcation exists now, a dividing of my life: before and after. How do I learn to stop pretending and avoiding? How do I learn to exist in this, my new epoch?

## The Louder Song

A few appointments later, Mark offers this: “I’d like you to think of suffering as an invitation. You have two choices:

Continue to pretend that it doesn't exist, which clearly isn't working, or accept the offer."

To *accept* comes from the root *to grasp*, to willingly take what is offered.<sup>1</sup> It's the willingness part I wrestle with. I am currently unwilling to take this cup, mostly because I have a lot of questions about it. What precisely does this particular invitation mean? How difficult will it be to accept? I feel a bit like C. S. Lewis, writing to his friend and minister, "We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be."<sup>2</sup>

I catch my first glimpse of the answer when a friend invites me to a choir concert. I could use a night out, a night *off* from everything, so I join her.

The performance takes place in this cool little theater-in-the-round in downtown Chicago. As we arrive, ushers pass out programs and point us to our seats. We're running late, so I briefly glance at the program, barely registering the title of tonight's concert. I fold it up and stick it in my purse. We grab our seats just as the lights dim, and a large projector screen descends from the ceiling. The screen flashes a line from Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*: "The weight of this sad time we must obey; speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."<sup>3</sup>

Choir members clothed in all black walk onto the stage and start to sing a slow, sad, ancient funeral dirge. Meanwhile, the screen flashes a trigger warning, then cycles through a series of raw images—a starving mother and baby; a child soldier; lands ravaged by famine; high school students participating in a walkout; a funeral; and other visual depictions of pain, poverty, and corruption. The mood in the theater,

previously expectant, excited for the concert to begin, soon grows sorrowful and heavy. *Why did we come here tonight?* I think. *This is a mistake.*

What my friend and I don't realize is that while we watch this depressing performance in front of us, a second choir has silently filed into the room and surrounded the entire audience. Quite unexpectedly, they raise their voices and begin to sing over us. It's startling, certainly, but not scary. I immediately recognize their song from my adolescent days, a classic U2 refrain: "I still haven't found what I'm looking for."<sup>4</sup>

As I listen to the familiar words, a thought begins to gently poke and needle at me: *What am I looking for?* Soon, the answer hits hard, sharply. It's a realization about the crux of my struggle, the reason why I've been relentlessly avoiding the reality of suffering.

It's not the pain itself, I realize. It's not even the grief. It's not the fear about what might happen. It certainly *is* those things, but they are coupled with something more, something I haven't wanted to admit. Something I'm terrified to confess, because then it will be real. But this concert, this night won't let me keep it inside anymore.

Here's the truth: I've been looking for God to show up, and he hasn't. Or if he has, I can't seem to find him.

I'm disappointed with God.

He hasn't acted like himself.

He hasn't intervened, or healed, or done what I've assumed he should.

He didn't keep Cameron's feet from stumbling.

He didn't protect my bones from disease.

He didn't prevent my son's struggles.

Where's the healing, the wholeness, the rescue in Jesus that I've been promised?

I've walked with Jesus for so long. We've been through much together. We've overcome together. But now I feel utterly and completely abandoned. I don't know if he will ever calm this storm. I don't know if I will ever find a peace that passes all understanding. Where is God in this? What's he doing? I have no answers for these questions. All I know is that God no longer fits into the box I have designated for him.

I'm trying so hard to fake hope, but I still haven't found what I'm looking for. I'm so afraid I never will. If God never shows up, if he never rescues me, if he never meets me here in this pain, then my entire life of faith—the solid rock upon which I stand—will have been nothing more than quicksand.

Sure, I'm a mature enough Christian to know that when we feel these doubts, we're supposed to choose faith, choose truth, choose hope. Endure. But right now I'm tired of *supposed to*. Tired of pretending to rise above.

In the book of Judges, when the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he pronounced, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." You can almost hear Gideon's guffaw in response. *Yeah, right. If God is with us, then why has all this happened to us? Where are God's wonders? Where is his rescue? God is not with us. He has abandoned us.*<sup>5</sup>

I'm here, wanting the same thing Gideon wanted, the thing that every sufferer before me has wanted—proof of incarnation, proof of God's ability, proof of God's power over evil. *God, if you're Immanuel, if you're truly with us, then prove it.*

Unlike Gideon, I can't bear to lay out a fleece or ask for that proof, because I am afraid God will refuse. He'll

be offended that I've even dared to ask. What if he doesn't answer? What if he won't show up? Then what will I do? How will I keep going?

"Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you," Gideon pleads with the Lord.

"I will wait until you return," God patiently, lovingly replies.<sup>6</sup>

As I sit listening to these two antithetical choirs in front of me, I plead, silently, along with Gideon. *God, I don't feel strong enough to lay out a fleece, to ask you to show up. But at the very least, please don't go away.*



Lost in my thoughts, I don't realize that something about the concert in front of me is shifting. I'm not sure I even realize what happens as it does. Maybe it's because I'm familiar with the U2 song, or perhaps it's due to the way the choir has wrapped themselves around the audience like a warm and comforting blanket. They sing like they're performing lifesaving emergency surgery. And somehow the second song begins to overpower the suffering song in front of us. The dirge-choir is still singing. The visceral images are still flashing in front of us. But the hopeful song grows louder. The audience's focus has moved from one song to the other. *I believe in the Kingdom Come. . . . You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains, carried the cross of my shame. . . .*

Soon, the choir director invites the audience to sing along with them. My friend and I sit there listening to the rising voices around us. We're crying now, both of us. Almost the entire audience is in tears. We're united by this strange,

shared experience. I'm singing and laughing through tears—that emotional cocktail when you feel everything all at once and your body doesn't know which outlet to choose.

At last, I give myself permission to drop the pretending, drop the can-do Mary Poppins spirit. From my gut, my chest, my throat, I let out a deep, loud, guttural sigh, a moan. It's like all of the tidy, tightly coiled pieces of my broken, confused heart finally unfurl and release, exploding all at once. My friend looks at me, shocked. "Are you okay? Do we need to leave?"

"No," I say more forcefully than I mean to, through tears. "We need to stay right here."

For the first time in a long time, I choose to be still. To bear witness to my own suffering and the suffering of others. I don't want to leave. I want to remain present in what feels like a holy, necessary moment.

This concert director has somehow managed to do something I have not been able to do, and I want—*no, I need*—to soak it in. She has artfully acknowledged the existence of evil and suffering without any sugarcoating, without any need to lighten the mood with a show tune, without needing to organize it perfectly on a shelf. She has allowed the unanswerable to remain unanswered while still declaring that suffering will not have the final say.

And then, from someplace sacred and holy, from somewhere deep within the myth inside all of us, I remember that this is what God does.

In a world full of hate, abuse, and game change, God doesn't avoid or ignore pain. He sings a louder song over it. And he invites his hurting people to sing with him.

I reach into my purse and grab the concert program. As

expected, the double-sided sheet of paper contains information about the choir director, the performers, and the songs. But it's the title of tonight's performance I want to read again. It's as simple as it is profound: *A Lament*.

Here at this concert, with Bono's lyrics surrounding me and my friend beside me, I finally understand the invitation of suffering.

Suffering is an invitation to stop pretending.

Suffering is an invitation to stop avoiding.

Suffering is an invitation to let go of control.

Suffering is an invitation to pour out our hearts.

Suffering is an invitation to lament to God.

## What Is Lament?

For those of us who follow Jesus, we live with down payments on the "Already" of God's Kingdom on earth. We see glimpses of God's healing power, his love, and his victory over evil. But we also live in the "Not Yet" of a broken, sinful world.

It is in between the Already and the Not Yet that we wait expectantly for the return of Jesus, who will one day make all things right, whole, and complete. Thankfully, we experience glimpses of gospel hope every time we see bits and pieces of God's reign and presence and power at work. But that final redemption—God's Kingdom arriving in full, all brokenness redeemed, all evil thwarted, all suffering ended—is our ultimate hope.

Lament, a crying out of the soul, creates a pathway between the Already and the Not Yet. Lament minds the gap between current hopelessness and coming hope. Lament

anticipates new creation but *also* acknowledges the painful reality of now. Lament helps us hold on to God's goodness while battling evil's evil at the same time.

Lament is an overlooked genre of prayer found all throughout Scripture. There are actually more lament songs than praise songs in the Bible. The Psalms alone contain more than sixty-five laments, including laments for fallen warriors, for illnesses, for victims of suffering, for the dead, and more. There are laments of vengeance, protest, repentance, loss, and even depression. Beyond the Psalms, the Scriptures also include words from famous lamenters like Rachel, Hannah, Moses, Job, Tamar, Jeremiah, and of course, Jesus. God gives us the laments of those who have gone before us as a way to talk honestly with him, as a way to enter into the biblical story, as a way to connect with the suffering people of God, and as a tool for thrusting our anger and our mysteries and our losses at him.

Even though laments fill the pages of our Bibles, for most Western evangelicals and post-evangelicals, lament prayers remain unfamiliar, mostly absent from our church calendars, conferences, and small-group curriculums. But lament is actually a godly concept, a spiritual discipline, and a powerful handhold in our seasons of sorrow. God has given us the biblical language and practice of lament as a way to express our pain and survive our suffering.

When the days are hard—when grief weighs as much as gravity, when we can't live a minute longer with the pain, when we're angrier or more disillusioned than we ever thought possible, when we can't find the right words for our difficult emotions, when our gnawing questions become too

much to handle—my prayer is that God’s Spirit will draw us back, time and time again, to lament, and ultimately into his presence.

And this is how, somehow, even in our darkest, most grievous laments, there’s hope—because we don’t lament to a void. We lament to the God who *wants* our laments. As we lament, we join in the chorus of those who have gone before us—those who have wrestled with suffering’s reality and come out, not unscathed, but still proclaiming God’s goodness.

Lament can lead us back to a place of hope—not because lamenting *does* anything magical, but because God sings a louder song than suffering ever could, a song of resurrection, renewal, restoration, and *re*-creation. Lament helps us to listen for God’s louder song and to believe that one day, we will hear it above the noise of our pain.

## The Invitation

After the concert, I return home to a quiet house. Kevin and the boys are all tucked in and sound asleep. Taking advantage of the stillness and the emotion of the concert, I don’t go straight to bed; I want the chance to think over my therapist’s question again. Can I accept the invitation of suffering?

I understand now what the invitation is. In our pain, God invites us to express our grief about the unraveling of life. At the same time, we are invited to unabashedly, unashamedly declare that we want it back. No more Broadway musicals, no more pretending. Just the naked self, standing before

God—all of our disappointments, deferred dreams, and disillusion in tow.

I don't play any instruments, so I can't strum a U2 ballad. Even if I wanted to write a song, I don't have the right words to express the weight of my pain. Instead, I open my Bible to the poetry of the Creation story, to find some words to lean on.

I grab my journal and pen and write a prayer, a shaky attempt at lament. For the first time, I'm ready to acknowledge how hurt I actually am. And though it's certainly not a finished lament, this feels like a good start.

*Father God, the Eden you and I have existed in for some time seems to be crumbling before my very eyes. You're not walking with me or I'm not walking with you—I can't tell which anymore. I feel naked and ashamed, vulnerable. Chaos has ensued. Darkness hovers here. My world is formless and void. Do you see me? My family? My marriage? My children? Can you hear our cries? Creator God, please create again. Maker of heaven and earth, remake this brokenness into something new, something better. Help me hear you, help me listen for hope. Help me endure.*

### *A Lament by Job*

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

THE LOUDER SONG

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,  
and naked I will depart.

The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;  
may the name of the LORD be praised.”

In all this, Job did not sin by charging God  
with wrongdoing.

**JOB 1:20-22**

how

Ashley's Lament



ASHLEY IS ONE OF MY KIDS' favorite babysitters. One summer, she watched them nearly every day so I could finish writing my first book. My sons and I learned a lot from this strong young woman as she watched her older brother battle cancer. The first funeral my sons ever attended was his.

Ashley shared this lament with me and gave me permission to share it with you. If you grieve, may you find a kindred spirit in Ashley and sense the love in her lament.

## Ashley

If you had asked me as a young girl to talk about pain, I would have told you that *pain* is a word associated with the physical: skinning your knee, getting a shot, snagging your arm on a branch while tree climbing.

I was very active as a child, which, of course, led to me getting hurt. A lot. Such as one afternoon when I was riding my bike with some neighborhood kids. I don't remember the fall, just my arm stinging a little. What I do remember most vividly is my friends' reactions.

Taylor's eyes went wide with horror. Dustin ran straight home. Riley told me that we were finished playing, that I needed to leave my bike and get home as fast as I could. We had never played like we were delicate china dolls, but suddenly I was so fragile in their eyes.

I went home with my head down, annoyed that I was wasting prime afternoon play hours. When I walked through our front door, I yelled for my dad, told him I'd fallen and my friends had sent me home. When he walked around the corner and saw me, he immediately froze. He turned a shade

paler and tried not to gag. What I assumed was just a little scrape was actually a shredded forearm. When my dad ushered me to the bathroom sink to wash me off, I finally understood the seriousness of the damage.

My father carefully held my arm and started to pick out the blacktop bits. That's when I saw my little seven-year-old frame in the mirror, bloody and helpless, and the fear in my dad's face. By then, the initial adrenaline was wearing off and the awareness of pain had set in. I started crying and looked in the mirror again. It dawned on me that I wasn't some cool biker chick. I was just a seven-year-old girl who had been riding her bike a little too wildly, and I got hurt, simple as that. But that was pain.

Physical pain as a young child is one thing, but when you see it, as an adult, in another's eyes, when you see it in their actions, when you're scared for someone you love—that type of pain is completely indescribable.

Thirteen years later, I took up my father's position as a caretaker. But this time, I stood by my dad and the rest of our family as we tended to my eldest brother, who was only twenty-four at the time, after he was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare, aggressive pediatric cancer. He was living in Vancouver, and after a chest X-ray at the ER for a bad cough, a nurse flippantly told him that it looked like he had a large mass in his chest and that it was probably cancer. (Let's just say, I've learned the importance of bedside manners.)

The doctors in Vancouver told my brother that his tumor was inoperable and incurable, and that he had only a few months to live. There was no second opinion.

When I got the phone call, my insides felt as demolished

as my little arm did after that rugged bike injury. I was driving to a friend's house, and I remember turning up the car radio loud enough to prevent my mind from thinking. I wouldn't let myself cry. I couldn't be in pain because this couldn't be real.

To see your playmate, a brother you love so dearly, suffer feels like holding an important secret that no one else in the world can know. Most people say that it's better to be strong in the face of a loved one's suffering; that it's not fair to be hurting when we're not the ones in a hospital bed. But my heart felt more and more wrung out every day.

I prayed so many times that God would remove all cancer cells from my brother. I prayed that I might be inflicted with the disease so that he could have his life back. *Why did it have to be him? How will we get through this?*

Though this is the biggest valley my family has ever trudged through, God's hand is evident in it. Many people have prayed for us. They've donated money and food. They've offered to paint our house, watch our dog, and plan birthday parties for us. Some friends even arranged a trip for our family of six to travel to Hawaii.

My brother's life was a daily battle until the end. We are still grieving. We will always grieve. Still, I will choose to worship and follow God, especially in this pain. I will know him here, as much as I know him in my pleasure. I will hope in Revelation 21:4: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."