



TERRA  
McDANIEL

*Hopeful  
Lament*

TENDING  
OUR GRIEF  
THROUGH  
SPIRITUAL  
PRACTICES



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## *Ashes for Beauty*

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,*

*You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.*

*You must wake up with sorrow.*

*You must speak to it till your voice*

*Catches the thread of all sorrows*

*And you see the size of the cloth.*

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

AS THE FLAMES OF OUR HOUSEFIRE were making their way through my daughter's carefully preserved keepsakes and the shelves of our beloved books, our ordinarily cranky neighbor stood outside sobbing for us. My dazed father-in-law wandered around the yard looking for his socks. And I was barefoot in 100-degree heat, holding my phone.

In the midst of the chaos, I tweeted a message from the book of Job: "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21 CSB).

I must have been in shock. I remember cracking a joke with our youth pastor as orange flames roared through the roof and blackened the limestone walls of our home. He wore the blank

expression of a deer in headlights, while I was recalling a funny moment from several years prior. On that earlier night, the fire department had been erroneously summoned when commuters noticed an unexpectedly lively bonfire, meant for spiritual contemplation and roasting s'mores, in our backyard. I imagine I sounded crazed to chuckle while my house was being consumed behind me. Or maybe I seemed flippant, like I couldn't care less about what was happening.

When I think about that post today, I'm not sorry I shared it. But just as that proclamation was only the beginning of Job's journey through pain and loss and sometimes misguided comforters, so it was for my family and me. I think where people of faith often get it wrong is to stop with praise or trust like Job's. Or, just as harmful, to fast-forward to Job's encounter with God that leads to his confession of God's sovereignty and power, which is quickly followed with his restoration. As if the lives of his newborn children could replace his sons and daughters who died. As if all that came in between—the aching and the questions and confusion—are incidental. They aren't. They are essential parts of a mysterious and perplexing story with a troubling end. And I love that the Bible doesn't turn its face away from any of it. We do so at our peril.

### *An Ancient Source of Help . . . and Hard Questions*

Job is a book of poetry that describes the life of a righteous man and his experience of suffering and loss. What those of us reading his story know—that Job's friends did not—is that Job was innocent. Was he, were *they*, being tormented to settle a divine argument about why Job worshiped God? Satan argued

Job was faithful because of God’s provision of wealth, vitality, and family. But God maintained Job was blameless and gave Satan freedom to take everything he had—and he did exactly that. Job’s oxen, donkeys, sheep, camels, and his children all died violently in a single horrific day. Messengers arrived, one after the other, to tell Job about attacking Sabceans, wildfires, Chaldeans, and windstorms.

And Job refused to blame God. He got up, tore his clothes, shaved his head, and called out, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). That response to suffering and loss leaves me in awe every time. I copied some of those words when my house was on fire, but I can’t say that I grasp what they really mean, then or now. There is a steel and grace in them that is beyond me.

Job’s and his unnamed wife’s misery wasn’t over yet. God again pointed out Job to the Accuser. He asked him to notice how Job still honored God and turned away from evil. Satan snorted in derision, “Take his health and you’ll see how quickly he turns against you.” Again, God allowed it. Job’s wife told him to give up. She figured death was better than the kind of life in which the Divine seemed to want him to suffer.

Job’s friends heard the news and left their homes to comfort him. From a distance, he was so disfigured they didn’t recognize him. They cried for him. And then they did precisely what was needed—they met him where he was in his grief.

In the film *What Dreams May Come*, Robin Williams and Annabella Sciorra play bereaved parents trying to figure out

how to live again after losing their two beloved children in a car crash. It's a story of the afterlife filled with rich images drawn from various faith traditions and literature, including Dante's visions of heaven and hell. When the mother, Annie, isn't able to cope, she commits suicide and is condemned to hell. Her husband, Chris, refuses to abandon her there and risks his sanity to try and find her.

When he does, he's struck with the revelation that it wasn't her grief but rather his refusal to allow either of them to fully mourn their children that separated them. Sitting with her in what looks like the ruins of their home on earth, he recognizes he was part of the problem; "Not because I remind you [of them]. But because I couldn't join you."<sup>1</sup> In the film, his belated willingness to meet her in the fullness of her grief and engage his own unlocks a healing connection that ultimately frees them both.

Like Chris, Job's friends didn't simply observe from a polite distance. They joined him in his grief. They tore their robes as Job had rent his. They covered themselves with dust as he was covered in ashes. They sat with him in silence. After a week, Job was ready to say something.

And what he said is breathtaking. He cursed the day of his birth—because never having lived seemed better than surviving within his loss and pain. Or if he must have been born at all, why couldn't he have died at birth since he would be with those who were now at rest? He wailed, "Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in? For my sighing comes like my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what

I dread befalls me” (Job 3:23-25). His cries of agony will be familiar to all who have known grief. His words and his actions are part of the excruciating truth-telling that grief requires: it’s called lament.

### *Moving Through Grief*

It’s never a good sign when people start comparing your life to a biblical figure known for pervasive suffering. But that’s what started happening to my family a few years before our house fire. Things were falling apart, and our once tight-knit family connections were significantly strained.

We had just reached a new, more-settled normal and were trying to embrace hope for the future. My daughter and I had just gotten matching tattoos of the word *hope* alongside a swallow in flight, inspired by Psalm 62:5-6. And then, our house burned to the ground. We had much to lament.

Ancient practices like Job’s, lost or forgotten in many modern cultures, also appear in the Gospel story of Jairus’s daughter. That’s the story of a local synagogue leader who seeks Jesus’ help for his ailing daughter. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of Jesus agreeing to help and following Jairus toward his home before being interrupted by another healing, that of a woman who’d been hemorrhaging for twelve long years. After pausing to affirm her faith, Jesus continued on his way.

But it was too late. When they arrived at the leader’s home, the girl had already died. Their friends and neighbors had gathered to grieve, crying loudly and playing music to mark her loss. When Jesus told the mourners she wasn’t dead, their

tears vanished and they started laughing. In the past, I assumed their performance of grief was by definition insincere and took their apparently mocking laughter as evidence of that fact. Similar practices of enacting grief, like wearing rough clothing, tearing garments, and pouring on ashes, also seemed inauthentic and overly dramatized to me.

But I've come to believe that practices like these and the inner healing work they're connected with are essential. Lament is more than mentally acknowledging the reality of loss or pain. It's holding our grief and letting ourselves fully experience it instead of numbing or ignoring it, hoping it will go away. Spoiler—it won't.

Lament is carrying our questions and complaints before the Spirit of God. It is expressing pain in an embodied way where it doesn't turn into violence directed at ourselves or anyone else. And there's no question it's something many of us have to learn how to do. James K. A. Smith says, "Mourning takes practice."<sup>2</sup> It doesn't come naturally to most of us.

But the alternative is to bury our grief or anguish so that it becomes toxic to ourselves or those around us. This can be true for individuals and families, and even entire nations. Pain can make us so hypervigilant about avoiding more of it that we miss out on life around us. Grief can make it harder to learn from our mistakes.<sup>3</sup> Unresolved pain and anxiety can cause us to exaggerate the risk of bad outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Trauma is intense grief related to an overwhelming event or series of experiences. It changes us physically: recalibrating our brains, increasing stress hormones, altering systems that help us distinguish relevant and irrelevant input, and "compromises the brain area



that communicates the physical, embodied feeling of being alive.”<sup>5</sup> When you remember trauma, your body experiences it as if it’s happening again.<sup>6</sup>

Therapist Resmaa Menakem distinguishes between what he calls “clean pain” and “dirty pain.” Dirty pain avoids, blames, and denies. It is an overflow of unhealed wounds that makes people prone to lash out or run away. It always creates more suffering. Clean pain still hurts, of course, but it is pain that can mend and create growth. When “the body metabolizes clean pain, the self becomes freer and more capable,” with access to insight and energy no longer needed to focus on grief.<sup>7</sup> Lament is clean pain. It is a way of taking ourselves as whole people—with bodies, souls, and spirits—seriously.

### *Permission to Grieve*

I’m sorry to say that I used to disparage stories of people escaping fires without taking as much as a photo album with them. *If it were me, I’d grab at least a few important papers or family photos*, I’d think to myself, not realizing how cold and unkind or downright wrong I was. When I heard my mother-in-law yelling, clearly frightened, I stepped out of my bedroom and saw a wall of orange flame outside the kitchen window. I raised my eyes farther and saw sparks beginning to shower into our study that held a collection of books my husband and I had been carefully curating since we’d gotten married two decades before.

I’d just thrown on clothes after showering, so I was stepping outside with wet hair and bare feet. I had time to make sure my family was outside and to grab my purse and our twenty-five-pound French bulldog. My hands were shaking so badly I

struggled to dial 911. Thankfully, a police officer, and surreally a friend of my daughter's, were both arriving at our doorstep as my in-laws and I opened the door to exit. Because the fire was visible from a nearby roadway, they and others, including the bewildered youth pastor, had come to make sure we were getting to safety.

Firefighters, who were incredibly hardworking and kind, were on their way. Kyle was stuck in traffic on his way home from work, and Torey was a few hours away working as a camp counselor. I might have been able to run in briefly for more than my wallet, but as we began to walk away from the flames there was a terrifying moment when we couldn't find my father-in-law. We discovered him trying to put out the fire with a garden hose even though the blaze was clearly well beyond that possibility. We now realize it is likely that he was in the early stages of dementia and had gotten confused in all the commotion.

Between the drought and the malfunctioning hydrant, the fire was catastrophic. We lost almost everything. My daughter's baby clothes and toys we'd saved for her future children were all gone. The roof over her bedroom had been entirely consumed, revealing a bright sky. The contrast between the cheerful blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds above and the charred remains below was jarring.

A quilt created by a beloved small group when we'd moved away from Houston was blackened and tattered. The Bible I'd used for prayer and study for over a decade, which was filled with notes and dates I'd prayed passages for whom and why, was lost. I couldn't find my wedding ring. Still, we were

exceedingly thankful that no lives had been lost, including that of our beloved dog, who would have been left home alone while we went out to dinner if the fire had started even a few minutes later than it did.

And *people showed up* to care for our family in incredible ways. They came the next morning to help us salvage what could be saved. Friends traipsed through the rubble to search for mementos—one found my wedding ring in our entry hall under a pile of insulation where fire hoses had propelled it fifty feet from next to the kitchen sink where I'd left it. Another family gathered up our dishes and took them to our neighbors' yard to carefully rinse them off with their garden hose. Others wiped off countless photographs, taken in those days before smartphones made printed photos relics, and laid them to dry. Others made us meals.

One kindhearted couple even took us in, and we lived with them until we figured out short-term housing. I'll never forget the mom who took my daughter shopping before her sophomore year of college began, for clothes to replace those she'd lost. We were deeply loved and cared for in that season and we will be forever grateful.

### *Everything Happens for a Reason?*

People tried to encourage us that “God would work it all for good.” About the fire, people said, “It’s just stuff.” They told us, “Aren’t you so glad you have faith, you *know* everything’s going to be okay? You *know* it happened for a reason.” But we didn’t know everything was going to be okay. We didn’t know that it had happened for a reason. We didn’t know what to

think. A few years later, I came across a greeting card that read, “Please let me be the first to punch the next person who tells you everything happens for a reason. (I’m sorry you’re going through this.)”<sup>8</sup> I promptly bought the card and have held on to it ever since.

I know they meant well. But words like those didn’t do us any good. They were salt in our wounds. We needed to learn to lament, to stay with our pain and our exhaustion and not pretend everything was okay. But we didn’t have the language or the tools or the permission. Many people of faith were encouraging us to fast-forward to happiness and joy. They wanted us to trust in God’s sovereignty without asking the hard questions that the circumstances of our lives required. Responses like that are all too common when people encounter hardship and suffering.

God’s greatness is very good news, but it is not the answer to human suffering. God’s power and wisdom don’t erase the grief of a parent who has lost a child. It doesn’t assuage hunger or sickness. It doesn’t diminish the stark realities of war or division. Believing God is good and able isn’t a magic wand to wave away pain in the here and now. The hope of future consolation, vital as it is, doesn’t negate the realities of grief in the present.

But like Job’s friends, many modern would-be comforters find it hard to stay with others who are experiencing intensely painful emotions after the initial crisis. Faith communities who embrace what Barbara Brown Taylor calls “full solar spirituality” tend to stress certainty, positivity, and an expectation of an unwavering sense of God’s presence. The trouble starts

when things go wrong in career, marriage, or parenthood. When someone begins trying to make sense of where God is and why bad things happened (or good things didn't), there is often room for questions at first. But Taylor says those who continue asking them will "be reminded that God will not let you be tested beyond your strength [and that] all that is required of you is to have faith."<sup>9</sup> And those whose suffering or uncertainty continue are sometimes told their problems are evidence of weak faith.

N. T. Wright calls perspectives like these a version of ancient pagan thinking. It goes something like this: God must have specifically orchestrated any bad thing that happens because he's responsible for everything. And if he does, it has to be because he's mad about something. When suffering is pervasive, as it was at the advent of the pandemic, language around God's sovereignty tends to equate it with judgment.

As it was for us, these kinds of messages are often delivered with good intentions. But they fall woefully short. I know countless people who have been accused of somehow contributing to their miscarriage, infertility, or family member's death. And many who were told to stop grieving and just believe God needed another [insert something their loved one was known for] in heaven. Messages like that are anything but harmless and often do real and lasting damage.

Wright contends Jesus "was unveiling a different meaning of divine sovereignty. *This is what it looks like*, he was saying as he healed a leper, or as he announced forgiveness on his own authority to a penitent woman."<sup>10</sup> He was revealing God's sovereignty when he befriended all the wrong people, went to

Jerusalem knowing he would be arrested, and when he hung on the cross. He was embodying God's sovereignty when he sweat blood in the garden and when he showed up alive after his resurrection.

Before our time of upheaval, I had been hearing a lot about God as exacting Judge, disappointed Parent, and all-powerful One. Those perspectives of God felt hollow and incomplete in the face of suffering. But recognizing that my view of how God works needed to shift and grow didn't solve my grief or confusion even though it was necessary and important. In my family's season of disorientation and loss, I needed to know God as a mother hen who wanted to protect us, as Jesus describes himself in Luke 13:34; I needed to know he would weep with me, saving each tear as if it were a treasure as Psalm 56 describes, more than I needed a towering whirlwind-God bragging about how strong he was. I don't believe God swaggers around boasting about how tough and in control he is, but there are too many pastors and teachers who paint him that way. I needed to know God as the One who would "cry out like a woman in labor" on behalf of the suffering and oppressed (Isaiah 42:14).

### *Antidotes for Despair*

It is time to recover lament as the hard but good gift it is. Lament is a crucial part of the antidote for despair and bitterness. Unprocessed grief hurts those who carry it and others around them, too.


And there have been so many unprecedented corporate traumas and losses in recent years that many of us have gotten tired of the word *unprecedented*. The sources of grief have

included highly personal and also communal loss. It will not do to try and shake these things off as if they didn't happen. If we try moving on without addressing the layers of sadness and loss, they will get carried forward in destructive ways. Eugene Peterson said anyone who "fails to acknowledge and deal with suffering becomes, at last, either a cynic or a melancholic or a suicide."<sup>11</sup>

We often struggle to face pain. There is a partial exception for those who have lost close family members, but even then there is not often space for genuine lament that unfolds over time, nor a recognition that since grief is experienced in waves, lament must often be revisited instead of being a one-time event. And accessible wisdom on how to do that can be hard to come by. Many of us have felt stuck around how to process our own sadness on top of the suffering around us. If we are going to survive and move forward in healthier, freer ways, we must lament.

And refusing to lament bypasses holy chances to honor those whose lives were lost or changed forever by pain and loss, including yours. We owe it to them, to ourselves, and to coming generations to learn or relearn these lessons.

It will be vital to take all this in stages, with time for tuning in to what brings life and joy in the midst. Consider spending some time with the full text of Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Kindness," which began this chapter. You can find it online or in her collection of poetry *Words Under the Words*. As you prepare to enter the difficult but necessary gift of holy mourning more fully, I hope you'll take some time to engage the prayer practice that follows. Breath prayers can help you engage the embodied wisdom of holding grief and goodness in tension.



# Breath Prayer Practice

EACH CHAPTER WILL CLOSE with some practices to try on your own as well as with others, including the children in your life. These will help you continue to engage the practice of lament so that it can become a healing habit over time. Some of them may feel silly or awkward at first. I encourage you to try them anyway, noticing what works, what doesn't, and what surprises you. My hope is that you'll make these rhythms your own. It's also important to name that some of these practices may stir up strong emotions or anxiety. Know that if something doesn't feel good or if you find yourself getting overwhelmed, stop the activity and return to a gentle breath. A short walk to discharge anxious energy might also be helpful. In all these things, proceed with kindness and care with yourself and those around you.

One of my favorite practices to engage in, and to share with those I host in spiritual direction, is *breath prayer*. It is a wonderful way to “pray without ceasing” in practice (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The idea is to choose a word or phrase to silently repeat as you breathe in and out. Conscious breathing is a



wonderful way to calm and ground the body. Breath prayers add a simple yet powerful layer of articulating a prayer, bringing intentionality to the natural breath with all its centrality to life.

Breath prayers are also extremely versatile. For a set-apart time of meditation, find a comfortable seat and engage a single breath prayer repeatedly, allowing your mind to drop into your heart and listening for the still small voice of the Spirit as well as your own soul. For a moving meditation, especially helpful in times of processing anxiety or grief, you can engage a breath prayer while walking outside. Breath prayers are also great on the fly during repetitious tasks that don't require much mental engagement, such as folding laundry, running errands, or paying bills. They're also a wonderful way to focus and invite the presence of the Holy before you log onto a Zoom meeting, begin a project, or respond to someone who has hurt or frustrated you.

To practice breath prayer, choose a word or phrase that expresses what you need or what you know. It could be a verse (breathe in “Be still”—breathe out “and know that I am God”); inspired by a line of a poem (breathe in “awakening to kindness”—breathe out “speaking to sorrow”); a name of God (breathe in “Yah”—breathe out “weh”); and so forth. I encourage you to try the following breath prayer.

**BREATHE IN:**     *Here I am.*

**BREATHE OUT:**   *Healer, meet me here.*

“Here I am” is a way that many biblical figures responded to the voice of God or to a family member (e.g., Genesis 22:11;

31:11; 46:2; Exodus 3:4; 1 Samuel 3:4-16). And it is a wonderful way to reconnect with the physical space you're in as well as your embodied presence in the moment. Remembering that the Divine is a healer, among other loving things, is always a good thing, and all the more so when treading into vulnerable territory like lament. When you are in moments of grief or pain, you might try letting your exhale be a little longer than your inhale. If you are feeling anxiety, you might allow your inhale to be a little longer. Whatever the rhythm of breathing, try to remain present with what you are really feeling rather than what you might wish you were feeling. Invite the Spirit into that place with you and notice what, if anything, shifts.

You might find it helpful to write this or another breath prayer on a note for your bathroom mirror or save it on your phone to remind you to tune into prayer, hope, and presence. I encourage you to experiment with using breath prayers in different places and postures with or without movement. I hope you'll find them a valuable tool for processing heavy emotions and all kinds of moments.

### *Breath Prayer Practice for Children and Families*

Children often find breath prayers helpful, too. You can invite children to engage a breath prayer of their own. You could provide bubbles and invite them to blow out their prayers. Children (and adults) often find this playful way of praying meaningful. Kids may also enjoy sculpting their prayers with modeling clay or building them with blocks or Legos. My friend Lacy Finn Borgo often invites children in the transitional

living facility where she offers holy listening to breathe in “God is with me” and breathe out “I am safe.”

You could also try this breath prayer with the children in your life.

**BREATHE IN:**      *God is with me.*

**BREATHE OUT:**    *I am loved.*

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