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Intro

In the film *500 Days of Summer*, there's a scene in which the main character, Tom, arrives at a party with the anticipation of seeing his crush, Summer, and hoping she'll fall back in love with him. This was his expectation. The film divides the scene into two parallel scenes, one that says on the bottom "Expectations" and one that says "Reality."¹ He hopes his expectations line up with reality. But when reality crushes his expectations, Tom is devastated. The following scene is a montage of Tom dealing with his depression.

This is an all-too familiar experience for us. How many times have we experienced the pain of reality completely misaligning with the expectation we hoped? This is a human thing. In fact, it goes far deeper than the crush that isn't reciprocated like one expects it to.

The reality is, God made this world, and He made it good and perfect. But then sin entered our story, and now creation, which includes us, is broken. Life has unfortunate turns of events—relationships are broken, pain is experienced.

But for some reason, we all have a sense that this is not the way life is supposed to be. It's as if we're longing for home, but home seems far away. We know that our world is broken (reality), but we long for it to not be this way. We long for our world to have love, peace, and justice throughout (expectation).

So, what do we do in response to the suffering that we see in our world, and in our own lives? What do we do when our hopeful expectations misalign with reality?

There's this book in the Old Testament that is often overlooked. It's called Lamentations. Its name comes from the word "lament." This is an older

¹ To watch the scene, look up on YouTube "500 Days of Summer Expectations vs. Reality", or follow this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI9eS4tVvZk>

word we use less often today, but it basically means “to express sorrow, mourning, or regret for, often demonstratively.”²

This book in the Bible is a poem of lament. Think of a teenager who gets his or her heart broken, and then goes to his or her room to write a poem or write a song on a guitar. This is basically the book of Lamentations, but multiplied by a hundred (not to discount the pain of a teenager with a broken heart, but as we’ll see, the grief in Lamentations is immense).

Here’s the back story to the book of Lamentations³: The city of Jerusalem, which God’s people saw as the city of God with them being God’s people, is destroyed by a stronger nation (Babylon). God’s people are carried off into captivity. Why did this even happen? How could God allow the city to be destroyed? The author of this poem of lament is anonymous in Lamentations, but is most likely the prophet Jeremiah. He is in great distress.

Lament is an important, and often overlooked, response to the suffering we experience. But let’s be honest: as Christians, we’re uncomfortable with honest lament. Usually when someone is suffering, we’re quick to give clichés such as, “Remember: God is in control,” or, “This is all a part of God’s plan,” or, worst of all, “This is God’s will.” We need to get back to the biblical practice of lament. We need to be honest with others, with ourselves, and most importantly, with God—that life is rough and messy.

The goal of this small group curriculum is that it would inspire healthy conversations for you and your students around the topic of suffering and our response to it. The goal is not that each group gathering causes everyone to leave group feeling melancholic and seeing life with a glass-half-empty perspective. Rather, the goal is that students would know that it is okay to be honest about the roughness of life and to lament.

² Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

³ To get an overview of the book of Lamentations, check out The Bible Project’s video on Lamentations: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8GDFPdaQZQ> (Look up on YouTube “The Bible Project Lamentations”)

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