

# REORIENT

Psalms for the Wilderness



Devotional & Workbook

*Weeks 1-3 - Disorientation*

# INTRODUCTION

*“The times of disorientation are those when persons are driven to the extremities of emotion, in integrating capacity, and of language.”*

*Walter Brueggemann, The Psalms & the Life of Faith, p. 8*

We’ve all had moments where the wind is knocked out of us — an unexpected diagnosis, a phone call about a beloved family member, an unbearable injustice witnessed firsthand. These are the experiences that demarcate our lives. There is life before that event, and life after — and what comes after may look nothing like what came before.

I remember this feeling acutely when my mother passed away after a long battle with pancreatic cancer. She fought bravely, but ultimately decided she was done fighting and ready to step into the arms of God. What made her passing especially disorienting was that my father had died about five years earlier. With both parents gone, I felt a loss I had never anticipated — the instinctive place you run to in crisis was simply no longer there.

I trusted my mother’s faith. I was grateful for her life well lived, and I believed Jesus welcomed her with, “Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master!” (Matthew 25:21) But beneath that faith was an unsettledness I’d never known. There were unanswered questions, seemingly unanswered prayers, and through it all — the world kept spinning. The sun rose. Work beckoned. Life made its demands.

The world had stopped for me. Why didn’t everyone else get the memo?

Augustine wrote something similar in his Confessions after his own mother’s death: *“The bitterness of sorrow could not exude out of my heart. Then I slept, and woke up again, and found my grief not a little softened.”* Even one of the church’s great theologians and early

fathers had no words — only sleepless nights and the slow drip of time.

One of the things I most appreciate about Scripture is that these feelings are not overlooked. Grief and disorientation are as present in our sacred text as joy and praise. Psalm 88 gives them full voice:

*“I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.”*

*Psalm 88:3–5*

Psalm 88 is also unique in that it opens with an appeal to God — and ends without resolution. There is no return to joy, no restoration offered. The grief, pain, and disorientation are simply left there, unresolved.

In a world quick to offer solutions and silver linings, Psalm 88 reminds us that sitting in grief for a time can be sacred. There are moments so disorienting that a well-intentioned word of hope feels completely out of place. Sometimes we need to scream. Sometimes to weep. Sometimes to be silent. Sometimes to question whether God really is *“compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness”* (Exodus 34:6) as He promised Moses.

It is my hope and prayer that as we journey through these Psalms of disorientation together, some of you will find the words you’ve been searching for. Your grief will be normalized, accepted, and honored. You may not find answers or immediate healing — but you will find that the psalmists have been where you are, and God saw fit to include it in His Word.

Feeling this way is not a denial of your faith. It is an honest expression of it.

*With you on the journey,*  
*Pastor Greg Flagg*

# Week 1 - Anguish

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Anguish. The dictionary defines it as “excruciating or acute distress, suffering, or pain” — but a dictionary barely scratches the surface of what this emotion actually feels like.

Author Brené Brown in her book *Atlas of the Heart* describes anguish as “an almost unbearable and traumatic swirl of shock, incredulity, grief, and powerlessness” — one that doesn’t just take your breath away, but, she writes, “comes for our bones.”

That image of anguish in the bones is exactly where Psalm 6 takes us. When the psalmist writes, “My bones are in agony. My soul is in deep anguish,” the same Hebrew word underlies both agony and anguish. This is not merely an emotional experience — it is something felt in the body and the soul together.

You’ve likely been there. It’s that moment when life throws something at you that you can’t catch — and the impact drops you to your knees, gasping. There’s no recovering quickly. There’s no powering through.

It’s no surprise, then, that the psalmist cries out: “How long, Lord, how long?” We don’t like sitting in anguish. Our instinct is to escape it, suppress it, or pick ourselves up from the ground and move past it as fast as we can.

But the psalmist offers a different path. Rather than stuffing it down or rushing ahead, they turn toward God — trusting that the Lord has heard, that the Lord receives our cries and prayers, that the Lord is present even in the deepest anguish.

That’s the invitation of the Psalms and this Reorient series. To discover what it looks like to bring our whole selves — including our anguish — honestly before God.

# Psalm 6

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Lord , do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. Have mercy on me, Lord , for I am faint; heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?

Turn, Lord, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave? I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes.

Away from me, all you who do evil, for the Lord has heard my weeping. The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be overwhelmed with shame and anguish; they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame.



Schenk, August Friedrich. *Anguish*, 1876-1878

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*Psalm 22 (v. 1-2): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest."*



# Practice

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## Immanuel Journaling

“Immanuel Journaling is an interactive means of prayer where you interact with Jesus about your real life and ask Him to show you His heart for you and the situation you’re in.”

1. Begin with telling God something you are thankful for.  
*“Lord, I am thankful for...”*
2. Write down what you sense as God’s response to your gratitude.  
*“Dear child of mine...”*
3. Write down what you believe God sees when He is looking at you in this moment.  
*“I can see you...”*
4. Write down what you believe God hears you have going on in your mind/heart. E.g., “I can hear you wondering how you are going to handle this big challenge with your boss...”  
*I can hear you...*
5. Write down what you sense God would say to you about this.  
*I understand how you feel about this/ how big this is for you...*
6. Write down what you perceive God might be saying to you in a kind, gentle, tender and loving way.  
*I am glad to be with you in this, and I am tender toward your weakness...*
7. Write about what God might be saying as to how he’ll be with you and help you at this time.  
*I can do something about what you are going through...*

*It’s important to recognize that you are not necessarily writing down the exact words of God. Rather, you are opening your heart to connect with God’s heart, and putting words to what you sense from God.*



## Check & Share

**Shalom Check:** ‘Shalom’ means ‘peace’. What we sense God saying should bring peace to us and to those we trust.

**Truth Check:** We also check our interaction against the Word and character of God. Does this line up with:

The truth of God’s Word?

The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23)?

The love of God (1 Cor. 13)?

The righteousness, peace and joy of the Kingdom (Rom. 14:17)?

**Share with another:** If you are comfortable, sharing with one or more people what you wrote anchors the experience for you, making it more ‘real’ to you, and may also bless the other person(s) as well!

*Adapted from deeperwalk.com*

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# Week 2 - Grief

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In one way or another, we've all felt grief—that ache when something significant has changed and we realize life will never be the same. Many of the Psalms wrestle honestly with grief. In *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Walter Brueggemann writes that the lament psalm of expressing grief becomes necessary when “the old worldview, old faith presuppositions, and old language are no longer adequate” (p. 19).

Often grief surfaces around the death of a loved one—the pain of knowing we will never see or hear from them again, and the slow work of moving into a future that holds their absence. Grief can also surface in other life transitions, like a new job or a move to a new city, even when the change is a good one.

Psalms 137 was written after Jerusalem's destruction by Babylon in 587 BC (see also Lamentations, Daniel 1; 2 Kings 25). It wrestles with the grief of defeat, loss, and exile. The Message paraphrase puts it this way: “Oh, how could we ever sing God's song in this wasteland?”

It's the psalm's final lines—about dashing infants against the rocks—that catch most readers off guard. But in the depths of real grief, strong and even violent feelings can run through our hearts and minds. The danger isn't feeling these things; it's leaving them unspoken. When we voice them, as the psalmist does, we let others witness our grief—which, as Brené Brown writes in *Atlas of the Heart*, is what we all actually need: “no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed” (p. 111).

If we're honest with God and ourselves, we can probably identify with feelings like these in our own lives. This psalm invites us to acknowledge those feelings—and to release them to God, who can bear witness and is the true source of justice and equity, rather than act on them ourselves.

# Psalm 137

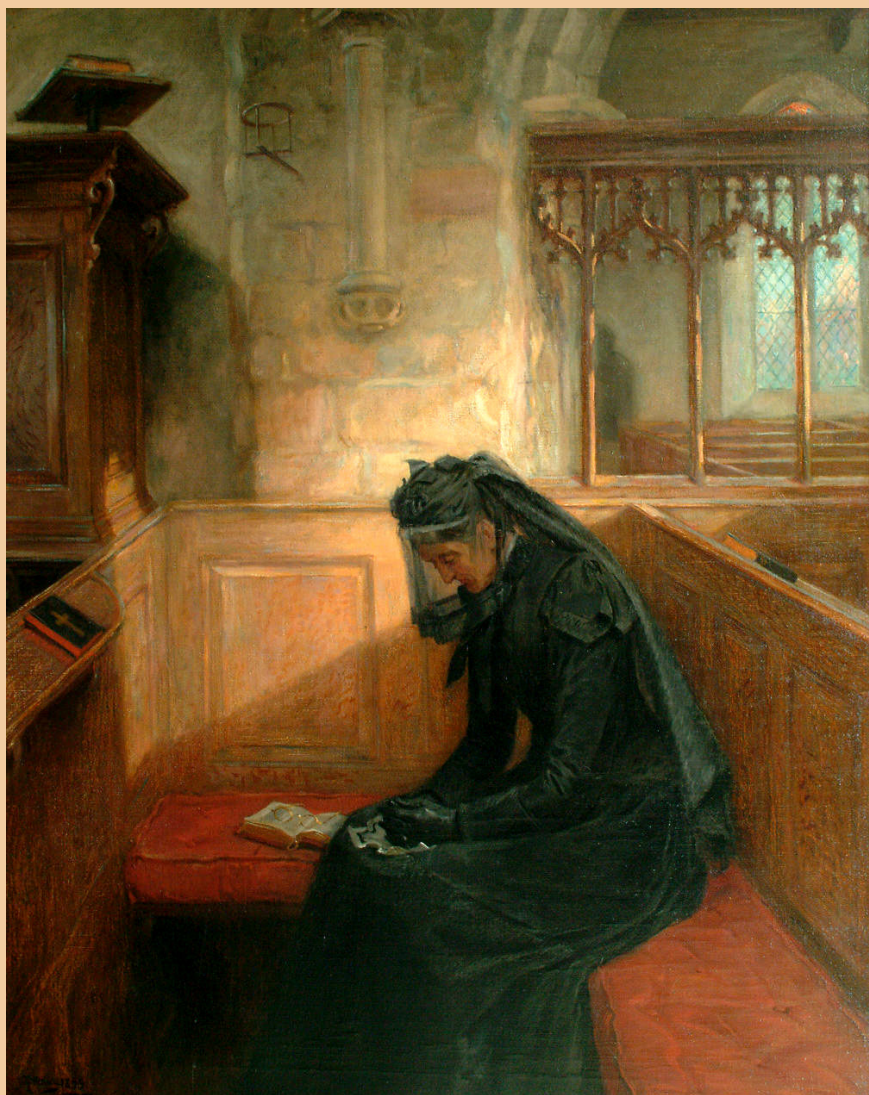
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By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. “Tear it down,” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!”

Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.



Hedley, Ralph, *The Widow*, 1899.

# Reflection

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## Also consider...

*Psalm 79 (v. 1-4): “O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble. They have left the dead bodies of your servants as food for the birds of the sky, the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild. They have poured out blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there is no one to bury the dead. We are objects of contempt to our neighbors, of scorn and derision to those around us.”*



# Practice

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## Immanuel Journaling

1. Begin with telling God something you are thankful for.
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3. Write down what you believe God sees when He is looking at you in this moment.
4. Write down what you believe God hears you have going on in your mind/heart.
5. Write down what you sense God would say to you about this.
6. Write down what you perceive God might be saying to you in a kind, gentle, tender and loving way.
7. Write about what God might be saying as to how he'll be with you and help you at this time.

*It's important to recognize that you are not necessarily writing down the exact words of God. Rather, you are opening your heart to connect with God's heart, and putting words to what you sense from God.*

## Check & Share

**Shalom Check:** What we sense God saying should bring peace to us and to those we trust.

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*Adapted from deeperwalk.com*

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# Week 3 - Overwhelm

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“They are the shrill speeches of those who suddenly discover that they are trapped and the water is rising and the sun may not come up tomorrow in all its benevolence. And we are betrayed!” The Psalms and the Life of Faith, p. 19

“Overwhelmed means an extreme level of stress, an emotional and/or cognitive intensity to the point of feeling unable to function.” - Atlas of the Heart, p. 6

# Psalm 69

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Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God. Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal.

You, God, know my folly; my guilt is not hidden from you. Lord, the Lord Almighty, may those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me; God of Israel, may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me. For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face. I am a foreigner to my own family, a stranger to my own mother's children; for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.

When I weep and fast, I must endure scorn; when I put on sackcloth, people make sport of me. Those who sit at the gate mock me, and I am the song of the drunkards.

(Verses 1-12)



Orta's Woodcarving & Crafts in Lakeland, FL  
*Prayer - Esculturas de Madera*, ca. 21st century.

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*Psalm 88 (v. 3-5) - "I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care."*



# Practice

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