



Liberating Renewal

Jonathan K. Dodson | Judges 2-4 | January 23, 2022

Last week I shared what it was like to work through some significant pain I accumulated over the past couple of years. How I *lamented*. This week many of you dipped your toe in the waters of lament, individually and as CGs. And from what I've observed, it sounds like we need to linger in lament, to create space to lament. And to do that it's important to recognize that lament is different from grief and complaining. We can complain and grieve without God, but lament includes God. It's not just mourning the way things have been, but mourning them with hope that they will not always be that way. Mourning with hope in a God who comforts and renews.

State of Things

So, what do we need to lament. It will vary person to person, but we've been through a lot the past year as a church, and as a nation. Our **church** was abruptly notified in early September that we could no longer lease the Ballet. Forced out the heart of the city, where we have faithfully ministered for 15 years, we now we find ourselves in Hyde Park, meeting in afternoons, unsure of where we will go next. I'm thankful for Red River's hospitality, and some of you love it here: the pews, lighting, a hospitable space where prayers and worship have gone up for decades. But others feel out of place. Several members have shared they find it difficult to worship here, associating it with legalistic environment of their youth. Some of you just miss being downtown. Gathering at the Ballet, singing your heart out, then going to lunch with friends. I miss it too. *But it not just our space that has changed; our community has changed too.* We've lost people to leftwing agendas and rightwing agendas. Matt Chandler, president of Acts 29, has said that most churches in 2021 lost a third, a third were on the fence, and a third are more committed than ever. We feel that don't we? The departures and the commitment. But it's not just numbers; its souls, faces, friends, family that have left, and *that* is hard. It's worthy of lament. We lost a couple staff members, but at least I came back! And we gained one in Jaime Dodson (who is not my sister, my wife, or any other relation!). All this change can make us feel like we are limbo. What is God doing with City Life Church? Then there's' the **cultural** volatility which overlaps with our



perplexing state. Our nation is divided, our culture polarized, our city afflicted. Just when you think we've cleared a covid hurdle, out comes another variant. Austin is Stage 5 with record hospitalizations, although good news Omicron is peaking. Nevertheless, covid takes families out of community, worship, fellowship every week. Some are extremely cautious or afraid; others use it as an excuse to coast in their faith. Our relationships are increasingly tenuous, family conflict, growing hostility and distrust. And top of that people are deconstructing, reconfiguring, and abandoning their faith. You have the friends. You may be struggling this morning. Let's pause to lament: loss of space, loss of relationships, loss of normal. Lord, I miss, I wish, it hurt...

Persistent Evil

Where are we going?! Brave New World, Station 11, a godless, immoral, dystopia? I believe God is speaking. And if we slow down, wait, and reflect direction and vision will emerge. I believe God wants to renew his Church. That he is purifying us, burning away dross, to yield golden faith. But we have to through the fire. It's biblical. In fact, there is a renewal cycle in the Scriptures. In Judges, the period after Joshua led Israel into Canaan, and before the time of the Kings, the people were ruled by judges who led them into renewal cycles over and over. The path to renewal included three things: did evil in the sight of the Lord, cried out for mercy, and God send a judge to save them: 1) Persistent Evil 2) Penitent Lament 3) Liberating Renewal. But isn't that the OT? Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come (1 Co 10:11). Let's heed the instruction. First, persistent evil. After Joshua died we're told: And there arose another generation after them who *did not know the Lord* or the work that he had done for Israel. And the people of Israel *did what was evil in the sight of the Lord* and served the Baals. They abandoned the Lord...went after other gods, bowed down to them and provoked the Lord to anger (2:10-12). A generation arose that did not know the Lord. Professor of Church History Richard Lovelace, calls this the Generation Gap. A generational gap of faith, where an entire segment of the population doesn't know the Lord or walk in his ways. Some surveys put the number of true believers at 6% The Pew Foundation reports record numbers of Nones, who don't identify with any faith. That's millions of people, but we know names, faces, the colleagues, the friends doing



evil in the sight of the Lord. *Serve the Baals*, a catchall term for pagan gods served to get security, wealth, pleasure. It's not just the pagans that serve the baals; it's the Christians. We too have our power idols, that draw us away from the Lord. Some drawn to *rightwing power* assert their rights instead of denying themselves. Christianity isn't about asserting power; it's about using it to serve others. Consider the cross. Others drawn to *leftwing power* eagerly calling out others based on agendas set by the left. If you're not careful, your moral agenda will be set by the headlines instead of Scripture. Jesus is neither left nor right; Jesus is Lord. Are you drawn by the right agenda, left agenda, or Jesus' agenda? But the more pervasive power idol is *self-centered power*. Bowing down to self. Preserving your right to do whatever you want at all costs. I've seen a lot of men operate like this in the church. They attend, maybe even participate in a City Group, but it's all on their terms. They are around enough to feel connected to a spiritual community, but they have little accountability for their decisions, faith, morality, business practice. I've seen this self-centered power devour men: compromise their business ethics, neglect their spouse, damage their faith. Self-centered power destroys relationships. People who always have to be right, in constant conflict: with friends, spouse, coworkers, social media. Productive, performing, outspoken not resting, receiving, quiet before the Lord. This Self refuses to address real issues, you bury yourself in work while neglecting your spouse, refuse to serve the church because you're too busy, see the kids are a nuisance instead of a ministry. Self-power says I don't need the church; I'll get through this alone. I don't really even need God. God is optional in the temple of self: "the people did evil in the sight of the Lord," repeated in every cycle (3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1). Everything is evaluated in the sight of the Lord, not the sight of the self. He sees all. He knows all. He judges all. And as evil built up, and their nation was afflicted, Israel would eventually cry out. The next phase: Penitent lament.

Penitent Lament

The people cried out to the Lord 3:9; *The people cried out to the Lord* 3:15; *The people cried out to the Lord* 4:3. [appear one at a time, stacked, on the same slide] Why did they cry out? They were *desperate*. They recognized their sinful estate in the sight of the Lord; they mourned their idolatry and cultural oppression before the face of God, and so they cried out *to God* to save them from themselves, their idols, their sins. They responded in



agonizing prayer and repentance. Do we not need to cry out? If not over our own sins and idols, over the sins and idols of our age? This is what God is doing. He is calling us to agonizing prayer, to *desperation*, penitence, and lament not only over what has been done to us, but also what we have done. Things evil in the sight of the Lord. Let's pause to lament, to cry out, to ask for a penitent heart, to ask that we might see things the way God sees things.

Liberating Renewal

Now, the third element: liberating renewal! We're told [For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them](#) (2:18). The Lord is compassionate, The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 103:8). So he [raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them](#) (Jdg 2:16, 18; 3:9, 15). Othniel: *The LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz* (3:9). Ehud: *the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man* (3:15). Deborah: a prophetess and judge saved Israel with Barak and Jael. The judges saved God's people over and over again. The word saved is *yasha*, from which we get Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus. Jesus is the *better* judge, who uses his power to defeat our enemies and idols, to overturn our sufferings and sorrows *on a cross*. That's how he uses power. Jesus is the *greater* Deliverer, who rescues us from self-worship to restore us to true worship! Jesus is the better Judge and the greater Deliverer. Will we drop your agendas and take up his agenda? Will you renounce self-worship and embrace true worship? Jesus Christ, the only one truly worthy of your devotion. *Jesus* wants to save you this very day from your sins and idols. He is compassionate and merciful! It gets even better. Do you know what happened after each judge saved God's people? *Rest*. Othniel: [And the land rested for 40 years](#) 3:11. Ehud: [And the land rested for 80 years](#) 3:30. Deborah: [And the land rested for 40 years](#) 5:31. [one at a time, stacked, on same slide] Church, Jesus is the perfect rest. He is the better judge, the greater deliverer, and perfect rest. Jesus died and rose not only to save you but also to *refresh* you. To bring you into his rest. To collapse into his grace. To trust in his saving arms. Jesus isn't only our redemption; he is our *rest*. Stop striving, drop your burdens at his feet, and receive his saving rest. His heart is to renew and refresh you. Pilgrim's Progress.