

REJOICING *in* LAMENT

*Wrestling with Incurable
Cancer & Life in Christ*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

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CHAPTER 1

Walking in the Fog

1. In this chapter, Billings shares about his initial cancer diagnosis and the questions of faith that it raised. At one point he expresses, “In many ways, this book is an extension of that initial effort at sharing, exploring, and testifying to the way in which the drama of the Triune God intersects with my story of pain and disorientation due to cancer” (4). Has there ever been a point of great pain or disorientation in your life? If so, where did you see God? What does it mean to confess that God is bigger than whatever trials you are facing?
2. Billings talks about the way in which God can make a “spacious place” (Ps. 31:8 NIV) in the midst of a narrowed, trapped space (5). What would it look like for a narrowed, trapped space to become a “spacious place” in your own life? In what ways can God do this?
3. Billings comments that visions of the “American dream” often include the belief that we are entitled to live a long life. Instead, he suggests that *every day* should be lived as a gift. In what ways have we confused the expectations of the “American dream” with the gospel? What are some ways to realistically live life as a gift?
4. Toward the end of chapter 1, Billings reminds us of our mortality while recognizing that death does not have the final word in Christ. However, death does have a limited reign. How have you encountered the pain of death’s limited, yet potent reign? Has this led you to bring your anger and grief before God? Why or why not? If you have brought this before God, how did you do so?

Encountering the Word Anew

Read Psalm 130 aloud. What do you notice about the way the psalmist approaches God in the psalm? What are some emotions that you experienced while reading this psalm? In what ways might psalms like this one be a companion in bringing our various emotions—grief, regret, discontentment—before the God of the covenant?



CHAPTER 2

Sorting through the Questions

1. Billings opens the chapter with the disappointing moment of his diagnosis, noting how he would have to share with his prayer group that their prayers had not been answered in the way they had hoped. Can you think of a time when your prayers were left unanswered or answered differently than you desired? How did this impact your journey of faith?
2. “I recall how I did my best to search for a ‘cause’ for my multiple myeloma shortly after my diagnosis. Intuitively, it was a pressing question. What did I do to ‘deserve’ this?” (25). Billings notes how sometimes suffering is the result of our actions. But often, it is not. In what ways have you been tempted to explain suffering as “retribution” from God? What do we do when our questions about why a tragedy has happened are left unanswered?
3. “Writers of laments and complaints in the Psalms often seek to make their ‘case’ against God, frequently citing God’s promises in order to complain” (19). Have you ever done something like this? Would you be open to joining the psalmist in doing this? Why or why not? What are some of God’s promises that you would cite in a “case against God”?
4. Many Christians try to explain *why* God allows horrible evil in the world; how could a loving and almighty God permit apparently senseless evil in the world? Regarding the problem of evil, Billings writes that “the Bible *has* addressed the question, and God’s response—as in the book of Job—is that humans don’t have an answer to the problem of evil, and we shouldn’t claim that we have one. It should remain an open question, one that we continue to ask in prayer and in our lives in response to the world’s suffering” (21). Do you accept Billings’s claim? What would it mean to surrender the task of finding “*the* reason” while keeping it an open question that continues to impact what and how we pray?

Encountering the Word Anew

Read John 6:60–69 aloud, and then review pages 31–33 as a meditation on this exchange between Jesus and his disciples. What does it mean for you to live and confess the truth that Jesus is our nourishment, that he is “the Holy One of God”? What is at stake in turning to the God of Jesus Christ for nourishment rather than to the convenient and self-soothing gods of our culture?



CHAPTER 3

Lamenting in Trust

1. Billings addressed his pain by praying through the Psalms. Has there ever been a time in your life that Scripture has healed your wounds either physically or emotionally? How did the Spirit do this through Scripture? What was it like to experience the word of God in this way?
2. On pages 40–41, Billings discusses the church’s tendency to skip psalms of lament in order to get to the “happier” psalms. What is your experience, if any, of lamenting in corporate worship? What space opens up when we join together in speaking or singing laments before God?
3. In relation to this, Billings writes, “The message can be, ‘If you want to fit in, first get your emotions in order so that you can be positive, and then go to worship’” (41). Are there ways in which your worshiping community sends this message (even if unintentionally)? How can we welcome brokenness in worship?
4. Billings makes the case that biblically, lament is not only tolerable for Christians, it is actually an act of praise to God (45–49). We all know that complaints can emerge from self-pity or self-absorption. What makes biblical lament(s) different? How do we discern the path toward lamenting in a faithful way?
5. Billings says that “a conviction that God acts as the Lord who has bound himself in covenant love is at the theological center of the book of Psalms” (50). Thus, the various types of psalms (thanksgiving, lament, etc.) all put their focus upon God’s covenant promises. How does this focus clarify what it means for you to pray the Psalms as your own prayers?

Encountering the Word Anew

Read Psalm 13 aloud, a psalm analyzed on pages 43–45. Then, read it again, joining the psalmist in invoking the Lord’s presence, presenting complaints and petitions, and ending with a declaration of trust. What complaints and petitions are you bringing before God’s presence? How do these relate to the final declaration of trust in the covenant Lord?



CHAPTER 4

Lamenting to the Almighty

1. “What if I’m not healed because I don’t have enough faith?” (56). Have you, or a loved one, ever wondered this? If a Christian came to you for counsel on this question, how would you respond?
2. Billings believes that psalms of lament are utterly dependent on a bold belief in God’s kingship and sovereignty. These psalms dare to hold God responsible in the midst of crisis (57–61). How do our prayers reflect what we believe about God’s sovereignty? Are there ways in which we say we believe God is king but do not display this conviction in our prayers?
3. The mystery of divine providence can be distorted by fatalism—belief that every event comes directly from God—which undermines the practice of lament. In what ways are we tempted to affirm God’s kingship but forget that God works through the means of people, medicine, and so on? Are there times when we forget that while God is king, his kingdom has not yet come in fullness?
4. Billings outlines how key elements of a classical Christian doctrine of providence can avoid both fatalism and deism, which sees God as distant and uninvolved when tragedy occurs. Do you find distinctions such as the “active” and “permissive” will of God helpful? What personal implications do you see from this approach toward God’s power in the world?

Encountering the Word Anew

Read Matthew 10:16–31 and then review the meditation on pages 70–71. What exactly is Jesus’s promise in Matthew 10:29–31? What are the implications of this for the people of God today?



CHAPTER 5

Joining the Resistance

1. In this chapter Billings discusses the way in which Christ's kingdom has "already" come but is "not yet" fully consummated. How might this help us understand both joy and grief in the Christian life? What implications does this have for a Christian witness in the world today?
2. On page 82, Billings connects Nietzsche's atheistic critique of Christian compassion and recent sociological research that indicates a lack of empathy and a growth of narcissism in contemporary Western culture. What cultural forces have undermined our ability to "walk in the shoes" of another? In what ways might praying the psalms of lament be a form of counterformation for the church?
3. The world is in the hands of God. Yet, "God hates the corruption of his good creation. God hates sin. God hates abuse. And so should we" (85). How can Christians hold together this trust in God's providence with an active faith, standing against injustice and other forms of sin? Why should we bother to do this when sin and injustice are far beyond what we can control or transform by our own actions?
4. In the final pages of the chapter, Billings contrasts "faith in faith" with "faith in God." What is the distinction here? What are the risks of simply having "faith in faith"?

Encountering the Word Anew

Read Psalm 140, noting that the psalmist wrestles with the same themes that chapter 5 explores. What do you notice about the psalmist from the particular wording that is used in the psalm? What is the nature of the psalmist's faith? Read the psalm again as a prayer.



CHAPTER 6

Death in the Story of God and in the Church

1. In the beginning of the chapter, Billings walks us through a few brief instances that were filled with abundant joy: his wedding day, the birth of his son, and the adoption of his daughter. But alongside this joy was an underlying awareness of death and the fragility of life. Have you ever had moments like the ones Billings describes? Why do you think the awareness of joy and mortality sometimes go together?
2. On page 97, Billings gives a thought experiment. “Think for a moment: if you *knew* you were going to live just five more years, how would you live? Now imagine that instead, you *knew* you would live thirty years. Would the story line of how you live in the second scenario be different?” Discuss these questions. Then consider: What does it mean for our life before God that we do not know when we will die?
3. On page 101, Billings writes, “My stomach is covered with bruises—blue, yellow, red, black. . . . I have daily, bodily reminders of the current ‘reign of death.’ But thanks be to God, I live not only in the midst of the reign of death but also by hope in God’s promise.” What are some physical signs of the reign of death in your life? What are some physical signs of hope in God’s promise (Rom. 6:8–9)? In what ways can corporate worship provide physical signs of God’s promise?
4. In what ways can the contemporary church provide a clear witness to the hope of the resurrection in a death-denying culture? How, or by what, is the church’s witness muddled and in need of further clarification and refinement?

Encountering the Word Anew

In light of pages 107–9, how can we begin to let go of our instinct to “write our own story” and allow God to finish the story? Read Psalm 27, reflecting upon the psalmist’s struggle and hope. Then join the psalmist in praying Psalm 27, bringing your hopes about life and death before the face of God.



CHAPTER 7

Praying for Healing and Praying for the Kingdom

1. What does it mean to pray for someone with an incurable illness? Should “incurable” even be in a Christian’s vocabulary? Why or why not?
2. In the beginning of this chapter, Billings explains that he would prefer public prayers to be more about *deep remission* and less about *complete healing* (111). How do you respond to this request? Is this distinction helpful? Why or why not?
3. Billings affirms that while God is fully able to heal and that we should pray for healing, “impatient prayers for an ‘immediate cure’ seem to tread on my loss rather than bring it in lament, petition, and thanksgiving before the Lord” (116). What was it like for you to receive prayers of healing? What do you think about Billings’s suggestion that prayers for healing go hand in hand with prayers of lament when there is an ongoing loss?
4. On page 117, Billings asks, “Do we believe in God or in the ‘power of prayer?’” Can you think of a time when you relied more upon your own act of praying than upon God? Why is this difference significant?
5. “We should pray for healing. But as we lament and petition, we should not pray for the healing to defy the loving, cruciform path of our Savior but to conform us to it” (129). What does it mean for us to pray for healing on a cross-shaped path?

Encountering the Word Anew

Pray the Lord’s Prayer. Review the last paragraph of the chapter, reflecting upon the particular way in which the kingdom comes in Jesus. In light of this, pray the Lord’s Prayer once again.



CHAPTER 8

In the Valley

1. Jesus says to his disciples in John 6:53, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Billings remarks on this, saying, “We feed on Christ, abiding and dwelling in him, the Healer” (135). What does it mean to find our nourishment in Christ, the source of life and healing? How does this present a different vision of healing from the common quests of “searching for a cure” for our diseases?
2. On page 140, Billings mentions the words of a colleague who says, “I wish it were me rather than you.” Billings deeply appreciated the sentiment, but later notes the limits of being someone else’s redeemer. As his oncology nurse noted, “I can’t take on their cancer” (140). What does it mean to be ambassadors of the Savior, foretastes of the coming kingdom, yet recognize that we are not the redeemer? In what ways are you tempted to act as the redeemer of others rather than an ambassador of Christ? What are the dangers in speaking about the church as “the hands and feet of Christ” in the world?
3. On page 146, Billings introduces the analogy of engrafting to describe the way Christ draws us into him: “In Christ we receive both forgiveness and new life. And it’s not because we tried really hard and pulled off ‘engraftment.’ It’s because by the Spirit, we have been united to Christ through faith” (147). What are the implications of receiving forgiveness and new life as a gift? What does it mean to say that apart from engraftment into Christ, there is “no life” (146)?

Encountering the Word Anew

What does it mean to be engrafted into Christ, as a branch is engrafted into a plant? Prayerfully read John 15:1–15. Reflect upon the life-giving nature of abiding in Christ: apart from him, we cannot produce any fruit.

The Light of Perfect Love in the Darkness

1. At the beginning of the chapter, Billings shares about the beginning of his time of remission. He was grateful, but to his surprise his “deepest grieving came after this good news” (149). Have you experienced a time in which gratitude and sharp grief were held together?
2. In this chapter, Billings explores a theological doctrine called “divine impassibility.” At the heart of his exploration is what it means when Jesus Christ laments on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Billings claims that when we affirm that God is impassible, we are not pioneers in our suffering because, in Christ, God takes on our human suffering in order to exhaust it and to heal us (154–55). As we suffer, what does it mean that God has taken on *bodily, human suffering* for our sake in Christ? What does it mean for your own life that God has taken on bodily suffering in Christ?
3. On pages 157–59, Billings contrasts the misunderstandings of divine impassibility with a biblical doctrine of impassibility. What is surprising in this account? What hopes or reservations do you have about this way of understanding the God of Scripture?
4. On page 161, Billings writes, “God identifies with human sorrow, grief, and suffering. But our hope is not that God is overtaken by suffering in the same way that we are. We hope because in Christ, God has taken on human suffering and death so that they are emptied of their ultimate sting.” How does God’s identification with human suffering—without being overtaken by it—relate to our hope in God amid suffering? How does it relate to our fears about suffering at the end of this life? How does it relate to our hope for the resurrected life, where there will be “no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Rev. 21:4 NIV)?

Encountering the Word Anew

While remembering that Jesus himself prayed the Psalms, prayerfully read the whole of Psalm 22. What does it mean to us that Christ prayed the opening of this psalm from the cross? With this in mind, what is striking about the rest of the psalm? Dwell in the psalm and its hopefulness amid lament.



CHAPTER 10

“I Am Not My Own”

1. “I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ” (169). Why are these words from the Heidelberg Catechism so central to Billings’s theology of hope?
2. Billings suggests that life for Christians here and now means living a life of both rejoicing in God’s promises and many gifts *and* lamenting that things are not the way they are supposed to be. What does it mean to expect both ongoing rejoicing and ongoing lament in the Christian life? What does it mean for a congregation to expect both rejoicing and lament in their life together?
3. “We can’t force God’s work into our calendar, into the ten- and twenty-year goals for our churches, colleges, and seminaries. We can only seek to participate in the eternal God’s ongoing work as grateful children” (182). For many of us, our lives are ordered by plans for the expected future—including plans for each day we reach on the calendar. And rightly so: we need to plan and steward our lives for God’s purposes. And yet, how do we recognize our profound limits as humans while we make these plans—that our lives are just a “breath” before the eternal God (Ps. 144:4)? How can we seek to participate in God’s ongoing work rather than assume that God’s work begins and ends with us or our generation of Christians?
4. Will all of our present questions be answered when Christ’s kingdom comes in fullness? Billings writes, “While Scripture testifies that God will make all things right in the final chapter, the Bible doesn’t promise that the resurrected in glory will know all the answers to our present questions” (187–88). What do you think of Billings’s response to this question? Are you okay with possibly never knowing the answer(s) to these difficult questions? Why or why not?
5. “We will never ‘get over’ the comfort and hope that our lives are found in none other than Jesus Christ” (187). Jesus Christ is central to Billings’s hope for the final “chapter”—a chapter that we do not write ourselves. What are the implications of a vision of final redemption in which Jesus is at the center? What does this hope mean for you in the fellowship with Christ that you experience right now?

Encountering the Word Anew

Reflecting upon your engagement with *Rejoicing in Lament*, read Psalm 31. In what ways are you rejoicing with the psalmist anew? In what ways are you lamenting with the psalmist in new ways? How does all of this relate to Jesus Christ as the central actor of the final chapter of the drama? Conclude by reading Psalm 31 prayerfully as a prayer of hope—hope amid ongoing lament, joy, and petition.