

*Prophetic Lament: A Call for  
Justice in Troubled Times*

Available Fall 2015

\$17, 224 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-3694-9

## The American Church Avoids Lament

When Soong-Chan Rah planted an urban church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, his first full sermon series was a six-week exposition of the book of Lamentations. Preaching on an obscure, depressing Old Testament book was probably not the most seeker-sensitive way to launch a church. But it shaped their community with a radically countercultural perspective.

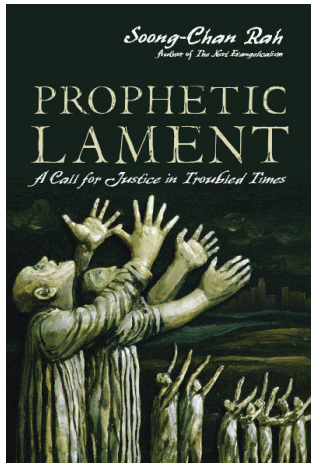
The American church avoids lament. But lament is a missing, essential component of Christian faith. Lament recognizes struggles and suffering, that the world is not as it ought to be. Lament challenges the status quo and cries out for justice against existing injustices.

Rah's prophetic exposition of the book of Lamentations provides a biblical and theological lens for examining the church's relationship with a suffering world. It critiques our success-centered triumphalism and calls us to repent of our hubris. And it opens up new ways to encounter the other. Hear the prophet's lament as the necessary corrective for Christianity's future.

### About the Resonate Series

The Resonate series is a new wave of commentary that recovers the ancient wisdom of Scripture and helps us understand how it resonates with our complex world. Contributors like Matthew Woodley and Tim Keel join series editor Paul Louis Metzger to bring the stories and insights of each book of the Bible into conversation with contemporary voices of hope and lament—the cultural messages we interact with on a daily basis. The result is a practical, pastoral, biblically grounded and culturally conscious un-commentary that may just change the way we interact with Scripture forever.

In the Resonate series the Scriptures become a meeting ground where God is confronted with the pressing concerns of our day, and we are confronted in turn with a fresh experience of God's truth.



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## Lament recognizes the struggles of life.

The American church avoids lament. The power of lament is minimized and the underlying narrative of suffering that requires lament is lost. But absence doesn't make the heart grow fonder. Absence makes the heart forget. The absence of lament in the liturgy of the American church results in the loss of memory. We forget the necessity of lamenting over suffering and pain. We forget the reality of suffering and pain.

In his book *Peace*, Walter Brueggemann writes about this contrast between a theology of the "have-nots" versus a theology of the "haves." The "have-nots" develop a theology of suffering and survival. The "haves" develop a theology of celebration. Those who live under suffering live "their lives aware of the acute precariousness of their situation." Worship that arises out of suffering cries out for deliverance. "Their notion of themselves is that of a dependent people crying out for a vision of survival and salvation." Lament is the language of suffering.

Those who live in celebration "are concerned with questions of proper management and joyous celebration." Instead of deliverance, they seek constancy and sustainability. "The well-off do not expect their faith to begin in a cry, but rather, in a song. They do not expect or need intrusion, but they rejoice in stability [and the] durability of a world and social order that have been beneficial to them." Praise is the language of celebration.

Christian communities arising from celebration do not want their lives changed, because their lives are in a good place. Tax rates should remain low. Home prices and stocks should continue to rise unabated, while interest rates should remain low to borrow more money to feed a lifestyle to which they have become accustomed.

Lament recognizes the struggles of life and cries out for justice against existing injustices. The status quo is not to be celebrated but instead must be challenged. If tax rates favor the rich, they should be challenged. Redistribution of wealth would not be a catastrophe but instead it would be a blessing in contrast to the existing state of economic inequality. The balance in Scripture between praise and lament is lost in the ethos and worldview of American evangelical Christianity with its dominant language of praise. Any theological reflection that emerges from the suffering "have nots" can be minimized in the onslaught of the triumphalism of the "haves."

What do we lose as a result of this imbalance? American Christians that flourish under the existing system seek to maintain the existing dynamics of inequality and remain in the theology of celebration over and against the theology of suffering. Promoting one perspective over the other, however, diminishes our theological discourse. To only have a theology of celebration at the cost of the theology of suffering is incomplete. The intersection



# BOOK EXCERPT

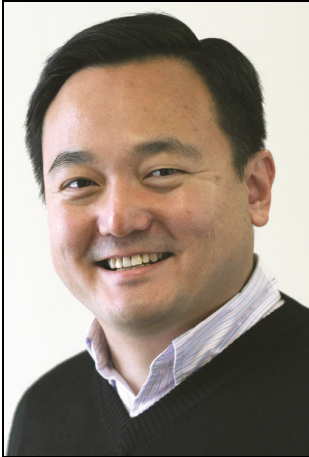
of the two threads provides the opportunity to engage in the fullness of the gospel message. Lament and praise must go hand in hand.

Walter Brueggemann asks the question: “What happens when appreciation of the lament as a form of speech and faith is lost, as I think it is largely lost in contemporary usage? What happens when the speech forms that redress power distribution have been silenced and eliminated? The answer, I believe, is that a theological monopoly is reinforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered, and the outcome in terms of social practice is to reinforce and consolidate the political-economic monopoly of the status quo.” For American evangelicals riding the fumes of a previous generation’s assumptions, a triumphalistic theology of celebration and privilege rooted in a praise-only narrative is perpetuated by the absence of lament and the underlying narrative of suffering that informs lament.

The loss of lament in the American church reflects a serious theological deficiency. This work attempts to remedy that imbalance by providing commentary on a neglected book of the Bible. The suffering endured by God’s people resulting from the fall of Jerusalem provides the backdrop for the poetic struggle offered in Lamentations. Lamentations provides the Biblical text and the theological lens through which we examine the themes of urban ministry, justice and racial reconciliation. We will seek to find contemporary application of the book of Lamentations within these current themes. . . .

Despite its age, Lamentations offers us a prophetic critique of what passes for gospel witness in our time. This critique offers fresh insight into our ecclesiology, or more precisely, how the North American Christian community should respond to a broken world. The major themes – the importance of lament, the necessity of engaging with suffering, the power of encountering the other – should lead us to a theology of lament that corrects the triumphalism of Christianity in the West. Lamentations may serve as the prophetic corrective necessary to embrace the next phase of Christianity.

– Adapted from the Introduction



**Soong-Chan Rah**, author of *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*

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## Author of *Prophetic Lament*

**Soong-Chan Rah** (DMin, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary) is Milton B. Engebretson Associate Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. He is the author of *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* and *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church*, as well as coauthor of *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith* and contributing author for *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*.

In addition to serving as founding senior pastor of the multi-ethnic, urban-ministry focused Cambridge Community Fellowship Church (CCFC), Rah has been a part of four different church-planting efforts and served with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Boston. He has been an active member of the Boston Ten-Point Coalition (an urban ministry working with at-risk youth) and is a founding member of the Boston Fellowship of Asian-American Ministers. He serves on the boards of World Vision, Sojourners, the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) and the Catalyst Leadership Center.

An experienced cross-cultural preacher and conference speaker, Rah has addressed thousands around the country at gatherings like the 2003 Urbana Student Missions Conference, 2006 Congress on Urban Ministry, 2007 Urban Youth Workers Institute Conference, 2008 CCDA National Conference, 2010 Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (GCTS) National Preaching Conference and the 2011 Disciples of Christ General Assembly. He and his wife Sue have two children and live in Chicago.