

# **Biblical Responses to COVID-19: Lament, Bodies, Breath**

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Hein-Fry Book of Faith Challenge 2020

## Biblical Responses to COVID-19: Introduction and Context

This curriculum was developed in the spring of 2020, when it became abundantly clear that any approach to biblical literacy would need to account for the contextual moment as the community faced the COVID-19 virus, restrictions related to curbing its spread, and the myriad effects that radiated from these realities. The class itself took place in May, a few months into the pandemic's presence into the U.S. At that time, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery had been killed, but George Floyd's highly publicized murder and the subsequent uprisings for racial justice had not yet occurred. This curriculum was developed to address this particular historical moment head-on rather than working around it, doing so through an explicitly scriptural lens.

This curriculum was developed from a Lutheran (ELCA) perspective, and the class took place within a Presbyterian (PCUSA) community, Greencastle Presbyterian Church. This congregation is a historic part of the small town of Greencastle, PA, and includes 50-70 active members. The demographic makeup of the country congregation is primarily white and upper middle class, and age tends to skew towards the late 60s and early 70s, though there are a few families with school-age children. Our class included 7 participants who generally reflected that demographic, with ages ranging from 40s to 70s. The congregation, at this point in the pandemic, had been worshipping on Sundays via Facebook livestream, and their pastor had been posting short videos daily with faith touchpoints for the congregation. Online faith formation opportunities and other web-conferencing gatherings became a part of the life of Greencastle Presbyterian after this study ended, so it was a new experience for most. One couple in the class had an extended family member who was battling COVID-19 and died between our second and third sessions.

The curriculum explored gifts of faith, namely scripture, that serve to help respond to the particular context of a global pandemic. The first session named lament as a biblical response to tragedy, specifically exploring lament as a faith practice and generally expanding ideas of what biblically appropriate responses can look like for a Christian. The second session explored the holistic connections that bodies have to souls, minds, and social networks, and how the Bible has told stories of illness, purity, and healing. The third session focused on breath as one way the divine enters everyday life on earth, grounding discussion in biblical traditions of the Holy Spirit enlivening the world.

## Notes for Facilitators

This curriculum is shaped by the recognition that pastoral needs cannot be separated from learning capacity or styles. The content is meant to address contemporary concerns, taking care to introduce the Bible as life-giving word for whatever is going on in the world. The curriculum is informed by pedagogical principles that value engagement of multiple learning styles and access points for engaging with the text. Eye-catching slides developed via Canva included visuals for learners to follow along in the session, as well as music, prayer, videos, and imagery to expand the dimensions of the text each week. Knowing that, for health and safety reasons, this class would be done online, it was important to the design of the study to use the advantages of web conferencing like screen sharing and chat functions when possible.

Pedagogically, the curriculum adjusted from week to week based on what worked well for this particular community and what did not. Some of those changes included rewriting questions to be more open-ended, making time for participants to respond silently/individually to a text or a question before opening discussion up to the group, writing “block questions” that concisely included new information in the question itself, and preparing to be flexible according to emotional & devotional needs that came up in discussion.

This class also employed guidelines and norms for discussion that were intentionally and proactively set at the beginning of the study and of each class. The pedagogical purpose of these standards, developed by Dr. Crystal Hall and adapted for this context by Taylor Berdahl, is to make discussion accessible for participants because the expectations for how to treat one another are clear. For this study, the four guidelines that the group agreed to were as follows: we come with different biblical knowledge, we are charitable toward the intentions of others, we listen actively, and we validate varying experiences of this pandemic. Other options might include: we all have something to teach and to learn, we treat each other with respect and dignity, we step up and step back, etc. These are best used when generated by the group or with close knowledge of the group’s dynamics, and should be open to modification by the group as needed. Setting guidelines and norms from the beginning can help prevent conflict in discussion, and provide a means to address conflict if it does arise. For the context of a study within Greencastle Presbyterian Church, the participants already have implicit norms for their interaction in discussion groups. The facilitator found that it was helpful to explicitly name some “Guidelines for Caring Conversation,” but that the group defaulted to their (mostly healthy) norms because of long histories of doing faith together.

## Session 1: “Lament”

Popular religiosity in the United States often conflates positivity with Christianity. While hope is a central theological concept for Christians, it is not the *only* biblical response to suffering. As the participants face an unprecedented global tragedy in COVID-19, this session explores the tradition of lament as a biblical response that is holy.

### **Opening** (~40 minutes)

- S1 Begin with an overview of the Hein Fry Book of Faith Challenge (HFBFC) and this course.
- S1 Take time to orient folks to the video conferencing software, especially noting the hand raising and explaining etiquette about muting microphones.
- S2 Introduce the discourse guidelines and establish agreement with the group. In addition to the aforementioned guidelines, ask the group if they would like to add anything.
- S3 Check-in with the group as they gather. Prompt them to share the following: introductions, prayer requests, and a response to the focus question below.

What are signs of grief you have observed people experiencing?

- S3 Open with this prayer, including any prayer joys and concerns where appropriate. “God, we trust that you hear our cries and answer our prayers, and that even faith that has dwindled to the size of a mustard seed is enough for you. Especially today we pray for \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for walking with us even when we can’t see or even think about what’s around the bend of our journey. Gather us together across cyberspace and open our hearts to experience your life-giving word. Amen.”

### **Introduction** (~8 minutes)

- S4 Watch the music video together for the song “Weep With Me” by the Rend Collective.<sup>1</sup> The lyrics should be displayed for participants to read along with as they listen to the music.
- S5 Ask this priming question: “What are some faithful responses to tragedy?” Listen and reflect the answers that the group offers, and share an overview of the lament theme.
- S6 Share different definitions of lament from Eerdman’s Dictionary, Webster’s Dictionary, Oxford Dictionary, and Wikipedia. Let the group know they will be exploring lament more throughout the session.

### **Bible in the World** (~8 minutes)

- S7 If necessary, name the current context again. Then ask, “How are Christians ‘supposed to’ respond and behave right now?” Encourage participants to share expectations that they feel personally and that they notice culturally.
- S8 Show the group some prepared examples of hope as a shallow or exclusive response to COVID-19, asking the group if they can think of any other similar examples. Ask: What does this say about God? What does this say about humanity? Listen and reflect the answers that the group offers and explain, “Sometimes, we treat hope as the only acceptable response to tragedy or jump to hopeful responses too soon. When we too narrowly define what a holy response is, we can damage our own well-being and limit God’s emotional capacity.”
- S9 Show the group some prepared examples of lament as a modern response to COVID-19, asking the same questions from the previous slide: What does this say about God? What does this say about humanity? Listen and reflect the answers that the group offers and explain, “There is a long history of this way of engaging with God, even in our own scriptures.”

### **Bible as Word** (~26 minutes)

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAGqvq4N\\_zQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAGqvq4N_zQ)

-Introduce the text for the day, giving an overview of the Psalms (S10), the genre of lament Psalms (S11), and Psalm 80 itself (S11). See one-pager below for more information and detail.

-S12-13 Read Psalm 80 together, inviting two participants to read the Psalm responsively by verse. Make time before they begin for participants to open their physical Bibles, if they brought one. Display the text for all to see while it's read.

-S14 Ask the following discussion questions: What words or phrases strike you in the text? What in the text resonates with your felt experiences of COVID-19 so far? Where do we see hope in this psalm? Where do we see lament? What questions do you have about the text? Leave the full text of Psalm 80 on display for participants' reference.

### Closing (~8 minutes)

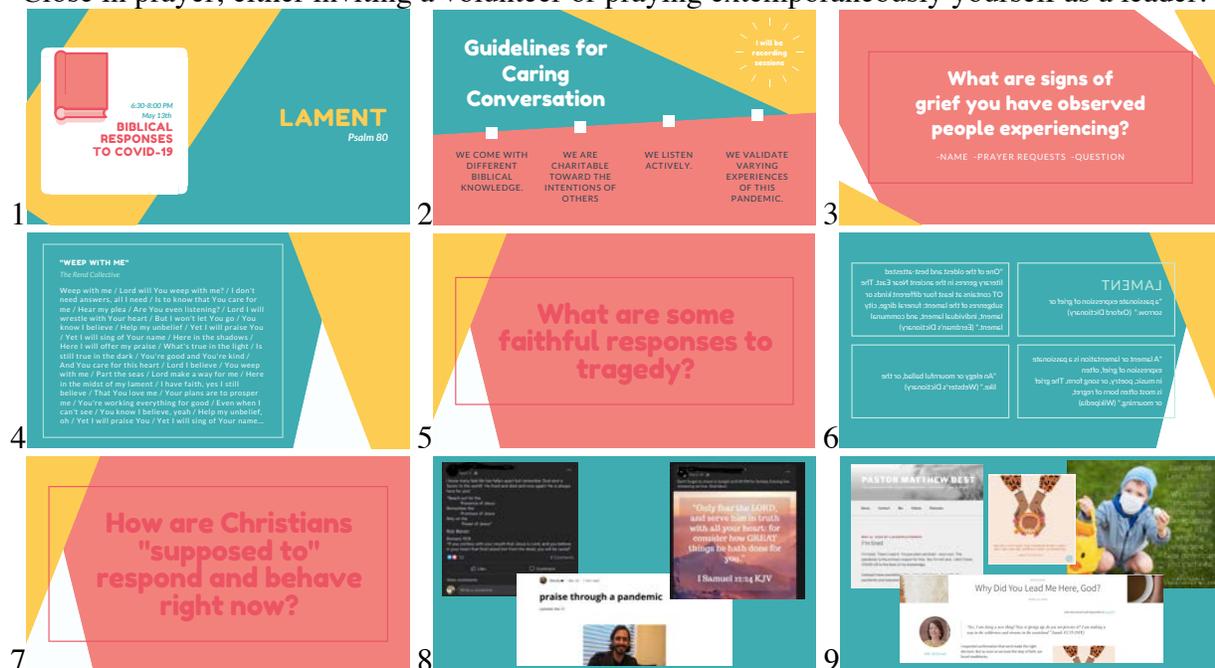
-S14 Summarize what you heard from the group in this session, and share the following thematic conclusions about lament:

- +There are multiple faithful responses to tragedy, not just one.
- +Expressing our anger and doubt can deepen our relationship with God.
- +Lament is just as biblical as hope.

-S14 Check in with the group: what are they seeing or hearing anew about the Bible today? Make silent time for participants to reflect, inviting them to write down their thoughts and share them verbally after the silent time is over.

-S15 Play the psalm-set-to-song, "Turn and Restore Us," by Richard Bruxvoort Colligan.<sup>2</sup>

-Close in prayer; either inviting a volunteer or praying extemporaneously yourself as a leader.



<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psalmmimmersion.com/psalm-80>

## The Psalms

**GENRE**  
Collection of 150 poems, prayers, liturgies, songs; generally meant to be sung.

**AUTHOR**  
Anonymous, but many are attributed to King David.

**DON'T PRESENT ONE COHESIVE THEOLOGY**  
"...express both their existential anxiety and their wonder and admiration for the God of creation."

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## Psalm 80

**GENRE**  
"Prayer for help" or "communal complaint" psalm; most common type.

**REFRAIN**  
"Restore us, O God; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved."

**CONCERN FOR SALVATION**  
More focused on immediate needs than ontological/eternal ones.

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**PSALM 80 (CONT)**  
8 You have brought a vine out of Egypt; you cast out the nations and planted it.  
9 You cleared the ground for it; it took root and filled the land.  
10 The mountains were covered by its shadow and the towering cedar trees by its boughs.  
11 You stretched out its tendrils to the sea and its branches to the river.  
12 Why have you broken down its wall, so that all who pass by pluck off its grapes?  
13 The wild boar of the forest has ravaged it, and the beasts of the field have grazed upon it.  
14 Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven;  
15 behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted.

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1 Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.  
2 In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, stir up your strength and come to help us.  
3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.  
4 O Lord God of hosts, how long will your anger fume when your people pray?  
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have given them bowls of tears to drink.  
6 You have made us the derision of our neighbors, and our enemies laugh us to scorn.  
7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

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8 You have brought a vine out of Egypt; you cast out the nations and planted it.  
9 You cleared the ground for it; it took root and filled the land.  
10 The mountains were covered by its shadow and the towering cedar trees by its boughs.  
11 You stretched out its tendrils to the sea and its branches to the river.  
12 Why have you broken down its wall, so that all who pass by pluck off its grapes?  
13 The wild boar of the forest has ravaged it, and the beasts of the field have grazed upon it.  
14 Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven;  
15 behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted.

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"Turn and Restore Us"



# Psalm 80 Exegetical Overview

## Psalms Background

-**Genre:** a collection of 150 poems, prayers, liturgies, and songs.<sup>3</sup>

-Meant to be sung

-**Author:** multiple anonymous authors that have been traditionally attributed to or associated with King David based on superscriptions that were not originally included in the psalms,<sup>4</sup> as well as associations with parallel songs or events in David's life as depicted in 2 Samuel.<sup>5</sup>

-**Theology:** though the book is not a cohesive unit describing belief about God, it does provide an insight into the spirituality of God's people as they "express both their existential anxiety and their wonder and admiration for the God of creation."<sup>6</sup>

-The Psalms portray human perceptions of God, which include both merciful and vengeful qualities. This may or may not be true about God's actual character, as God is not directly voiced in the Psalms.<sup>7</sup>

-Certainly, the underlying assumption of the Psalmists is that God is active in the world.

## Psalm 80

-This is a "prayer for help"<sup>8</sup> or "communal complaint"<sup>9</sup> psalm, which is the most typical type of Psalm.

-Genre elements:<sup>10</sup>

1. Plea
2. Complaint
  - a. Communal psalms tend to "...arise from the fate of the people rather than the experience of individuals...They mark calamities of various sorts, war, exile, pestilence, famine."<sup>11</sup>
3. Confession
4. Appeal
5. (Sometimes) Praise for Divine Response

-More focused on immediate needs than ontological/eternal ones. "Consequently, the psalms as a whole are animated by trust rather than fear."<sup>12</sup>

-It includes a refrain every few verses. "Let your face shine" (v. 3, 7, 19) is one way for God to reveal God's power, and requesting it is a way to ask for a blessing.<sup>13</sup>

-V. 4-7 Why is God "angry with your people's prayers?"

-See Isaiah 1:12-17<sup>14</sup> "...cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

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<sup>3</sup> Lutheran Study Bible pg. 847

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, pg. 495

<sup>6</sup> Collins, pg. 505

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 512.

<sup>8</sup> Lutheran Study Bible pg. 938

<sup>9</sup> Collins, pg. 500-501

<sup>10</sup> Ibid pg. 501.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Collins, pg. 506.

<sup>13</sup> Lutheran Study Bible pg. 938

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## Session 2: “Bodies”

In western thought and culture, there is a tendency to understand body, mind, and spirit as separate entities that function independently of one another. Through the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions, folks are experiencing the interconnectedness of their physical, social, mental, and spiritual worlds. This session explores a biblical account of Jesus holistically healing.

### **Opening** (~20 minutes)

- S1 Make time for participants to gather a Bible, pen, and paper.
- S2 Briefly remind participants about the discourse guidelines and check in that nothing needs to be added to the guidelines.
- S3 Check-in with the group as they gather, prompting them to share prayer requests and answer the focus question below. If the group is not already familiar with one another, encourage them to share their names again (or display them on their Zoom profile!)

“We think about embodiment as an understanding of how we exist in and interact with the world that takes into account our whole selves: body, mind, and spirit. What have you noticed about your embodied interactions lately?”

- S3 Open with this prayer, including any named joys or concerns as appropriate:

“Creator God, thank you for the gift of our embodied lives. Heal the hurt, illness, and betrayal we are experiencing, especially\_\_\_\_\_. Calm our fears of our own bodies and of those around us, assuring us of your protection through reason and boundaries. Surround us with your love, especially when we feel the most unlovable. Amen.”

### **Introduction** (~20 minutes)

- S4 Play the video “My Body Attacked My Brain | Lupus” on YouTube.<sup>15</sup>

- S5 Ask the priming question :

“How do our bodies relate to our brains, our spirituality, and our communities?”

Listen and reflect what the group offers, and share, “It seems that the way God created us, our bodies are more than just the shell for our ‘souls.’ We experience the Holy Spirit, community, and even our own selves through our bodies. That’s why it can be so devastating to be sick or wounded, and especially not knowing what’s going on inside (or unknowingly carrying a virus!)”

### **Bible as Word** (~30 minutes)

- S6 & S7 Introduce the literary and historical context of Mark 5:25-34. See one-pager below for more information and details.

-S8 Read the text together. Ask for two volunteers who will be willing to read Mark 5:25-34. Make time for everyone to open their physical Bibles in their homes, and then ask the first reader to read the story out loud. Leaving the text displayed on the slide, make time for 2-3 minutes of silence for “noticing,” inviting participants to write down what they’ve noticed. After the noticing time is up, ask the second volunteer to read the text again.

- S8 Open the discussion with the question, “What did you notice about the story?”

Listen and reflect what the group offers, and then share what you noticed, as well as the following:

- The phrase “in her body” that shows up in the NRSV translation of the story in verse 29.
- Instances of touching in the story (especially “from behind,” which was inappropriate and surreptitious) are striking in the context of a pandemic because of restrictions on touching today.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gLIktClchQ>

-S8 Ask the following questions as time allows:

In verse 34 (and 28), the Greek word for “healing” or “being made well” is “sozo,” which has connotations of healing, restoration, liberation, and holistic well-being. That combined with the Jewish blessing of “shalom” that Jesus gives the woman in verse 34 are clues that this story is about much more than simply stopping her bleeding. How do you imagine the woman felt afterwards? How do you imagine her process of reintegration into community?

Medical solutions in 1st c. Palestine for hemorrhaging women were disappointing/nonexistent. In fact, there is history of doctors prescribing bloodletting for conditions like hers (Black pg. 140). The story itself tells us that for a dozen years she had been consumed with finding bodily healing. Share about a time when you’ve seen bodily health taken for granted.

In Jesus’s day, there were societal norms understood by everyone about interpersonal interaction that were based on gender, purity, and class. The woman in the story breaks these norms based on her faith that she will be made well/sozo-d. How does our faith guide us in knowing whether certain societal norms are protecting or inhibiting us in a given situation?

-S8 Ask, “What in the story could we connect to COVID-19?” Listen and reflect what the group offers, lifting up our connection right now with the woman and not being allowed to touch others, as well as taking our own health for granted.

### **Bible in the World (~10 minutes)**

-S9 Compare these two pictures.



<sup>16</sup><https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Frichbrownforewords.wordpress.com%2F2015%2F06%2F27%2F62821015%2F&psig=AOvVaw0vFJvkMtetBMAVxWWQEGIJ&ust=1590000676835000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCNiXi67MwOkCFQAAAAAdAAAAAB>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/arizona/2020/04/24/how-photo-protesting-nurse-phoenix-went-viral/3023111001/>

(For background, one is an artistic depiction of this Bible story, and the other is a photo from an anti-mask protest in Phoenix in April 2020.)

-S9 Ask, "What do you see in these pictures?"

-S10 Invite sharing, saying, "I wonder...How would the people in each of these pictures rank the following values: bodily health, freedom, & societal norms"

**Closing (~10 minutes)**

-S11 Summarize what you've heard from the group, including these thematic conclusions.

- +Our bodies don't just hold us, they are us.
- +Our bodies have been created good and deserve being treated with dignity- what does that look like moving forward?
- +Our relationships and presence in community are embodied.
- +Through absence, this time is teaching us how precious the embodied community that God created is.

-S11 Check in with the group: what are they seeing or hearing anew about the Bible today? Make silent time for participants to reflect, inviting them to write down their thoughts and share them verbally after the silent time is over.

-S11 Close in prayer; either inviting a volunteer or praying extemporaneously yourself as a leader.

The image shows a 3x4 grid of 12 presentation slides, numbered 1 through 11 (with the final slide being a duplicate of slide 1). The slides are designed with a color palette of teal, yellow, and red. Slide 1 is the title slide: "BODIES Mark 5:25-34" with a date of 4:30-5:00 PM, May 20th, and the text "BIBLICAL RESPONSES TO COVID-19". Slide 2 is titled "Guidelines for Caring Conversation" and lists four points: "WE COME WITH DIFFERENT BIBLICAL KNOWLEDGE.", "WE ARE CHARITABLE TOWARD THE INTENTIONS OF OTHERS", "WE LISTEN ACTIVELY.", and "WE VALIDATE VARYING EXPERIENCES OF THIS PANDEMIC." Slide 3 states: "We think about embodiment as an understanding of how we exist in and interact with the world that takes into account our whole selves: body, mind, and spirit. What have you noticed about your embodied interactions lately?" Slide 4 is titled "My Body Attacked My Brain | Lupus". Slide 5 asks: "How do our bodies relate to our brains, our spirituality, and our communities?". Slide 6 is titled "Mark 5:25-34 Literary Context" and includes sub-sections for "FIRST GOSPEL WRITTEN" and "MARK'S 'SANDWICHING'". Slide 7 is titled "Mark 5:25-34 Historical Context" and includes sub-sections for "EXCLUSION FROM COMMUNITY" and "HONOR AND SHAME". Slide 8 is titled "MARK 5:25-34" and contains a detailed text-based retelling of the biblical story. Slide 9 is titled "What do you see in these pictures?" and features two images: an artistic depiction of Jesus healing a woman and a photograph of an anti-mask protest. Slide 10 is a duplicate of slide 9. Slide 11 is a duplicate of slide 1. Slide 12 is a duplicate of slide 1.

# Mark 5:25-34 Exegetical Overview

## Literary Context

- Mark: first gospel written
  - This story is found in Matthew (9:19-22) and Luke (8:42-48) too
- This passage occurs on the way to fulfill Jairus's plea to heal his daughter
  - This kind of "sandwiching" of stories is a common literary technique used in Mark, frequently intended to emphasize a point with the story that comes in the middle.

## Historical Context

- Exclusion from community: In both Roman and Jewish culture in 1st century Palestine, sickness often meant exclusion from community.
  - "Society's invisible boundary against the impure"<sup>18</sup>
  - "Multiply miserable" in 1<sup>st</sup> c. Jewish culture<sup>19</sup>
    - According to Leviticus 15:19-30, everything and everyone a menstruating woman comes in contact with is impure along with her with an extinction period (usually until evening or for 7 days) before purity can be restored. The code specifically outlines that this is true for chronic hemorrhaging, too.
  - Honor & shame: Because of her perpetual menstruation, this woman would have been infertile, as well as poor from seeking treatment (as verse 26 will tell us.) Both childlessness and poverty would have brought her shame.

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<sup>18</sup> Clifton Black, *Mark*, page 141. Abingdon Press 2011.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

## Session 3: “Breath”

Because COVID-19 is a respiratory virus spread through particles in the air, the idea of breath is top of mind for many living through 2020. This session explores the presence of breath and the Holy Spirit in the Bible, turning to Ezekiel for an account of God’s breath playing a role in a community that feels scattered and powerless.

### Opening (~30 minutes)

- S1 Make time for participants to gather a Bible, pen, and paper.
- S2 Briefly remind participants about the discourse guidelines and check in that nothing needs to be added to the guidelines.
- S3 Check-in with the group as they gather, prompting them to share prayer requests: joys, concerns, and hopes.
- S3 Open with this prayer, including any named joys, concerns, or hopes as appropriate:  
“Spirit of God, you gather us together from the ends of the earth, connecting us in new and unimaginable ways all the time. Breathe your healing into us and our world, especially \_\_\_\_\_. Call our attention to the joys for which we can be thankful, especially \_\_\_\_\_. Breathe new life into us as we hope for [a new normal], trusting that whatever our future holds, you will be with us. Amen.”

### Introduction (~12 minutes)

- S4 Introduce and play the video “Breathe by Rachel Held Evans” on YouTube.<sup>20</sup> The video is a spoken reading of an excerpt from her book *Searching for Sunday*, and the author died unexpectedly from an infection, leaving behind young children in spring 2019.
- S5 Invite reflection, saying, “Share an example of God breathing new life.”

### Breath in the World (~8 minutes)

- S6 Ask the priming question :  
“What do you associate ‘breath’ with, especially lately?”
- S7 Display images of masks and ventilators.



- S7 Ask, “What feelings to these pictures stir up?”
- S8 Ask, “How has our sense of normalcy changed lately?”

### Breath in the Word (~30 minutes)

- S9 Introduce the literary and historical context of Ezekiel 37:1-14. See one-pager below for more information and details.
- S10 Read the text together. Ask for two volunteers who will be willing to read Ezekiel 37:1-14. Make time for everyone to open their physical Bibles in their homes, and then ask the first reader to read the story out loud. Leaving the text displayed on the slide, make time for 2-3 minutes of

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EbrPPVuGCK>

<sup>21</sup> [https://time.com/paramedic-coronavirus-diary/?campaign=soldsie&utm\\_source=instagram&utm\\_medium=social](https://time.com/paramedic-coronavirus-diary/?campaign=soldsie&utm_source=instagram&utm_medium=social)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10221416834146096&set=pcb.10221416895187622>

silence for “noticing,” inviting participants to write down what they’ve noticed. After the noticing time is up, ask the second volunteer to read the text again.

-S10 Open the discussion with the question, “What did you notice about the story?” Continue with the following questions as time allows:

“What difference does breath make in this story?”

“What connections do you make to COVID-19?”

“Verse 11 says, ‘Our hope has perished.’ What hopes are perishing for us? For those around us?”

“It is easy to resonate with the scattered bones who represent the people of God in this story. How does God gather us? Breathe new life into us?”

“In the course of Ezekiel’s prophecies and that of the history of Israel, God does not erase the destruction of the Temple or turn back time to ‘the good old days.’ God does promise a new Temple and a new reality for the Israelites. What new normal might God have in store for us?”

“Chapter 36 talks about God renewing our hearts/minds/wills as the first step towards restoration. What renewal might we need today (individually or collectively)?”

### Closing (~10 minutes)

-S10 Summarize what you’ve heard from the group, including these thematic conclusions.

+We are feeling, like the Israelites, dead, scattered, and anchor-less. The same God breathes life into us, calls us back together, and gives us a new anchor/new normal.

-S10 Check in with the group: what are they seeing or hearing anew about the Bible today and at the end of the course? Make silent time for participants to reflect, inviting them to write down their thoughts and share them verbally after the silent time is over.

-S11 Play the musical adaptation of Ezekiel 37, “Dry Bones” on YouTube.<sup>23</sup>

-S11 Close in prayer; either inviting a volunteer or praying extemporaneously yourself as a leader.



<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=563fsEFPLcQ>



What feelings do these images stir up?

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How has our sense of normalcy been changing?

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### Ezekiel 37:1-14 Context

**"PROMISES OF RESTORATION"**  
 After the first two sections that focus on judgement, chapters 33-39 focus on promise.

**EZEKIEL 37:1-5:**  
 The verses following our pericope continue to prophesy the union of the kingdoms of Israel.

**EZEKIEL 36:**  
 The preceding chapter talks about the renewal of hearts (minds/wills) as part of God's future restoration of Israel.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**  
 Israel is in the midst of the Babylonian Exile after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

### EZEKIEL 37:1-14

The Lord's power overcame me, and while I was in the middle of a certain valley, it was full of bones. He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry. He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?" I said, "Lord God, only you know." He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Lord's word!" The Lord God proclaims to these bones, I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord. I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise all about me prophesying, there a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone.

When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them. He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, human one! Say to the breath, The Lord God proclaims. Come from the four winds, breathe into these dead bones and let them live." I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company. He said to me, "Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. This is why I said to you, 'Only you know.'"

He said, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished." So now, prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says."

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### "Dry Bones"

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# Ezekiel 37:1-14

## Ezekiel Info

- Ezekiel was a prophet during the Babylonian exile (temple destruction in Jerusalem in 587BCE), likely exiled to Babylon as a religious leader 10 years before the temple's destruction and the fall of Israel.<sup>24</sup>
- Chapters 33-39 are "promises of restoration."<sup>25</sup>
- There are many questions underlying the book about why God would allow this to happen to God's chosen people. "Ezekiel's response is to announce the singular holiness of the one God of the cosmos."<sup>26</sup>
- Written from a priestly perspective (concerned with separation of the sacred and the profane).<sup>27</sup>
- Historically, we know that a second Temple will eventually be built in Jerusalem (516 BCE).
- Likely written between 593-571 BCE.<sup>28</sup>
- Ch. 36 describes God transforming hearts (/minds/wills) of the Israelites as part of the future restoration.<sup>29</sup>
- Ezekiel is known for Sign-Acts.

## Ezekiel 37:1-14 Info

- This passage has ties to African-American/slave theology and spirituals.
- Ruach* Hebrew word study: "wind," "breath," or "spirit"<sup>30</sup>
- The dry bones are seen as representing the Israelites who feel dead and scattered, separated from the Temple, and seemingly, God.
- Scattered bones could be a potential reference to Zoroastrian (Persian religion) funeral custom.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lutheran Study Bible pg 1337. Augsburg Fortress, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 1338.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Kaminsky & Lohr, *The Hebrew Bible for Beginners: A Jewish & Christian Introduction* page 161. Abingdon Press 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 166

<sup>30</sup> Lutheran Study Bible 1399

<sup>31</sup> Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: Third Edition* page 398. Fortress Press 2018.