

God In the Wail

A Theology of Grief That Speaks in Many Tongues

Grief does not arrive quietly in every culture.

On Saturday morning, just minutes into my chaplaincy shift, I was paged to a rapid response. A patient was in cardiac arrest. As I arrived, I found her family just outside the room: a quiet, stoic father whose primary language was Spanish, and a daughter whose grief erupted from her body in screams, sobs, and collapse. She fell to the floor crying out, “Save her,” her face flushed red, breath shallow, tears pouring. As the code continued—three times in total—the medical team offered the same devastating truth with compassion and clarity: the patient had gone without oxygen to her brain for nearly thirty minutes. Even if her heart could be restarted, her body was being sustained only by machines and medications.

With each update, the daughter’s grief intensified. She vomited. She wailed. She cried out again and again. As more family members arrived—eventually nearly thirty—each new entrance brought fresh cries, keening, and lament. Phones were held up on video calls so distant relatives could see, hear, and grieve in real time. The room became filled with sound: grief voiced loudly, physically, communally.

This was not the kind of grieving I had most often encountered in my ministry. And yet, as I stood within it, I realized: this was not disordered grief. This was embodied grief. This was communal grief. This was culturally faithful grief.

Scripture reminds us that lament has always been loud.

When Lazarus dies, Jesus does not offer a tidy theological explanation. Instead, “Jesus began to weep” (John 11:35). The Greek word used there suggests not silent tears but deep, visceral emotion. Earlier in the same chapter, Mary falls at Jesus’ feet, surrounded by mourners who are already wailing (John 11:32–33). Grief, in that moment, is not private or restrained—it is shared, audible, and physical.

The Psalms give us even more explicit permission to cry out. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord” (Psalm 130:1). “My tears have been my food day and night” (Psalm 42:3). These prayers do not ask us to modulate our grief into something polite or manageable. They assume that sorrow will overwhelm the body and demand expression.

Western, white, Protestant culture often privileges quiet grief—controlled, internal, and composed. Strength is frequently measured by stoicism. But Scripture does not equate holiness with restraint. In fact, the book of Lamentations gives voice to grief that refuses to be silent: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow” (Lamentations 1:12). Grief demands to be witnessed.

In many cultures, particularly within Latino, Mediterranean, African, and Middle Eastern traditions, grief is not something one carries alone. It is communal, vocal, and embodied. Wailing, crying, and physical expressions of anguish are not signs of hysteria; they are acts of love and testimony. They say: this life mattered. This bond was real. This loss is unbearable. This woman was mother to some, and referred to as mother to all. The matriarch of the family.

Ecclesiastes tells us there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:4). The text does not prescribe how mourning must look. It simply affirms that mourning is necessary—and that its form will vary.

As a chaplain, my role was not to quiet the grief or contain it into something more familiar. My role was to make space for it, to interpret medical realities with compassion, and to honor the family’s faith. When the time was right, I led them in prayer and called a priest to anoint the patient and administer the Sacrament of the Sick—ritual acts that grounded their anguish in sacramental hope. In that moment, theology did not come through words alone. It came through presence, touch, oil, prayer, and permission to grieve fully.

Paul reminds us, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). He does not say, *correct* those who weep. He does not say, *quiet* them. He says to join them.

By the end of my shift, the family had moved—slowly, unevenly—from hysteria toward a fragile acceptance. When I handed them off to the afternoon chaplain, I received hugs, tears, and gratitude. I had been present with them in their grief, created sacred space for them. Later I learned the patient died that evening. Her passing was surrounded by prayer, sacrament, and a community that refused to let her go silently.

This experience challenged me to examine my own cultural assumptions about grief. What I initially experienced as unfamiliar or overwhelming was, in fact, deeply faithful. It was grief that trusted God enough to cry out. It was grief that believed love should be expressed with the whole body. It was grief that understood death not as a private failure, but as a communal rupture.

In a world that often asks us to grieve neatly and quickly, this family bore witness to a deeper truth: grief is as diverse as love itself. And God, who hears the cries of the Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 3:7), who receives the psalms of lament, and who weeps at a graveside, meets us not only in silence—but also in the wail.