

LO ALAMAN

**WE  
SANG A  
DIRGE**

POEMS, LAMENTS, AND OTHER  
THINGS THAT MATTER TO GOD

LO ALAMAN

**WE  
SANG A  
DIRGE**

POEMS, LAMENTS, AND OTHER  
THINGS THAT MATTER TO GOD

We Sang a Dirge Copyright © 2020 by Lo Alaman

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission, except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles.

All Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.”

Printed in the United States of America

*Cover design and layout by Strange Last Name*

Alaman, Lo, 1992-

We sang a dirge : poems, laments, and other things that matter to God / Lo Alaman. – Franklin, Tennessee : Seedbed Publishing, ©2020.

pages ; cm.

ISBN 9781628248456 (paperback)

ISBN 9781628248463 (Mobi)

ISBN 9781628248470 (ePub)

ISBN 9781628248487 (uPDF)

1. Grief--Religious aspects--Christianity. 2. Grief--Poetry. 3. Christian poetry. 4. Laments--United States. 5. Race relations--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Title.

BV4909 .A42 2020

248.8/6 2020947216

SEEDBED PUBLISHING  
Franklin, Tennessee  
seedbed.com

# CONTENTS

Preface . . . . .	7
-------------------	---

## PART ONE:

### **LEANING IN**

Anew. . . . .	13
For Jeremy Mardis. . . . .	15
Casting Cares . . . . .	17
House Rules . . . . .	18
Song of Submission . . . . .	21
The Prodigal Translates the BLM Protest . . . . .	23
To Pray/To Speak . . . . .	24
'20 . . . . .	25
And Now . . . What? . . . . .	28
Increase/Decrease . . . . .	30
Songs the Delivered Will Sing . . . . .	31
N Words We Weren't Allowed to Say . . . . .	33

## PART TWO:

### **LAMENTING WITH**

Post-Traumatic Stress. . . . .	41
In Search of Bright Sides and the Men That Stole Them . . . . .	45
When Protest and Prayer Are the Same Song . . . . .	47
Today We Say Enough. . . . .	49
Different Shades . . . . .	50
Cynicism . . . . .	51
Another One . . . . .	52
From Slaves to Exiles . . . . .	53
If These Should Hold Their Peace . . . . .	54
Landmarks—A Black Church Tale. . . . .	55
Black on Black Crime and the Grieving Christ . . . . .	57
Epiphany . . . . .	58

PART THREE:

**LISTENING TO**

Turn to Your Neighbor and Say, “Jim Crow” . . . . .	65
Praise Break—An Episode of Black Worship . . . . .	68
Joy in Spite Of . . . . .	71
Reunion . . . . .	72
Strangers and Stargazers . . . . .	75
And Then . . . Pain . . . . .	78
Thank You, but No Thank You. . . . .	79
Resilient. . . . .	81
An Ode to Mothers . . . . .	82
Sharpening Iron . . . . .	85
Ora. . . . .	86
Battle . . . . .	88

PART FOUR:

**LONGING FOR**

Zion, Part One . . . . .	93
Revival amidst Riots. . . . .	94
And Then . . . Freedom . . . . .	96
Prayer against Racial Divides. . . . .	97
From Whence Mercies Flow . . . . .	100
Ruah . . . . .	101
Zion, Part Two . . . . .	102
Pentecost . . . . .	104
And Still . . . Hope . . . . .	106
Informal Invitation . . . . .	107
Luminous . . . . .	109
Zion, Part Three . . . . .	110

# PREFACE

Ahmaud Arbery was gunned down the day before my twenty-eighth birthday. A few weeks passed and Breonna Taylor was killed on the same day that my daughter turned one. I didn't learn of either of these stories until they both garnered national attention later that May. Around that time, many of my white friends began to text and call me, to offer their condolences or ask for my opinions. Each conversation brought an opportunity to share the grace and truth of Jesus; to offer the good news as an alternative to the polarizing narratives of the day. I took every call.

When the video of George Floyd's murder went viral, my phone could barely stay charged. I spent the better parts of my day discussing systemic racism, the history of policing in America, racial reconciliation, and what role the church ought to play in all this. By the time the protests and riots began, the tone of the phone calls changed quite a bit. Some came seeking perspective. More came to share the perspective that their political ideology had already solidified. The work was tiring, but I'd committed myself to loving God and His people. Being available seemed like the first logical step in that direction. So I welcomed the exhaustion and bought a phone charger for my car.

I was invited to be a part of numerous panels. I got to jump on a few podcasts to talk about hard things pertaining to race. In the time of quarantine and the rise of Zoom meetings, there was no shortage of opportunities to step into these conversations. Conversations that I'd longed to have. For years I'd been heartbroken by the church's silence on issues of racial injustice and its complacency with homogeneity in worship. I'd been studying, praying, and waiting for a time when Christians would be ready to deal with this division in our culture, or at least address where it exists within our congregations. Finally, it seemed like we were at a point where these issues couldn't be avoided, and we'd be forced to deal with the mess we'd tried to sweep under the rug.

One day, I was on a call with a group of older white men in my church. They'd asked me to come and share my experience with them as a black man in America. Fortunately for them, I'd spent the last several months sharing my perspectives on the racial tension in our cultural moment and how I think Jesus is calling us to respond to it. Fortunately for me, that's not what they were interested in. "Thanks for the history lesson. But we were wanting to know how you feel." And just like that, I realized that I'd been sweeping my own feelings under the rug this whole time.

I'd been asked what I thought before I had a chance to process how I felt. And when asked how I felt, I'd placed reason in the place of emotion. I began to realize how this way of thinking had influenced my ministry. I'd made myself available to hear out the thoughts of anyone who called, but rarely did I ask them how they felt. When responding to their arguments, I tried to offer a more nuanced perspective and hopefully point people to Jesus. But my primary tool for this was to counter perspective with perspective, or facts with facts. I was trying to let information do a job that only compassion could do. The more I've wrestled with this notion, the more I'm convinced that this is what's happening in most of our culture, and it's why we're not getting anywhere.

When describing the generation of His day, Jesus said that it was as if children were playing music in the streets, yet the passersby wouldn't dance. They were like kids singing funeral songs in the marketplace, yet none would mourn with them. It isn't clear if the issue within this community was an inability to celebrate the joys and lament the burdens of others, or an unwillingness to do so. Either way, Christ's critique of apathy is explicit. Compassion has a job to do. And since arguments don't seem to be getting us anywhere, I'm hoping that a generation filled with the Spirit of God might respond better to the songs of those in mourning.

It is my belief that the cries of the black community have been and continue to be an echo of a deeper groaning (Rom. 8:19). The calls for justice, the will for unity, and the longing for our lives to matter all stem from and reach toward the God who made us in His image. And though

I hold that conviction closer to my heart now than I ever have before, I've retired from spending countless hours arguing to that end. After my conversation with that men's Bible study, I've sat in my own lament and let mourning take me to the Father's heart. This book is my attempt at condensing the racial tension and the unrest of black community, as well as my own, into a song for the marketplace.

What you hold in your hand is not a manual on lament, but rather a glance into mine. It is a collection of poems, journeys, prayers, and invitations. I offer no answers here, for only Christ has those to give. Poetry doesn't seek to share facts, but rather to share an experience. You'll find no politics or advocations for any government except the kingdom of God within these pages. Instead, I give you a window into the joy and grief of following Jesus in this skin. I pray these poems are a catalyst that open all sorts of windows (hopefully your own). Biblical lament stems from hope that God has more in mind for His people than the brokenness that they find themselves in. I pray these poems are a window into hope for you, as they have been for me.

Calling people "fam" has become a bit of a habit I've developed over the years. I hope this book, if nothing else, glorifies God as Father, portrays me honest as a human, and shows you that in Christ, we're kin.

Blessings, fam.

PART 1

# LEANING IN

*“Bear one another’s burdens, and  
so fulfill the law of Christ.”*

GALATIANS 6:2

# ANEW

Laid down here  
Are leftover wants and tattered dreams  
The rot of old and decaying desires  
But I'll not weep

Here my heart is set on new affections  
Here my fallen walls have been recycled into something much nicer  
A new song migrates from my belly  
Gains volume as it heads toward a frontier of voice  
Carves a path right through my heart on the way  
And makes no excuse for the mess it leaves

Find me,  
Surprised by the image of self not covered in shadow  
Fully awake with no lack to lay claim of me

Redemption is a holy thing  
What does praise look like now?

A child's palms  
Arms held high in longing toward a willing Father

A reaching heart  
Every beat chasing presence  
Seeking a love I once ran from

To recycle is to let go of what was  
It is putting purpose up for auction  
And laying our paddles down in surrender  
Confession comes easy when we allow grace to outbid shame

To admit the sins of this nation  
Is to make room for a better dream  
It is to repurpose our loyalty toward a Kingdom over a government  
And what does praise look like now?

A diverse hallelujah  
Rainbows jealous of how we make color sound so harmonious

A peace among saints  
Churches crying hosanna in unison  
Lions laying down with lambs  
Elephants and donkeys following suit

A fresh anointing  
An on-time worship  
Laid down here are old desires  
Behold,  
He does a new thing  
Perhaps it's time we sing a new song

# FOR JEREMY MARDIS

Oh son,  
young and sweet fruit.  
Did the bullet have a taste for you today?

Tell me,  
was your skin not  
the armor they thought it was? Five shots pierce you

easy.  
Six years living.  
You died a million heartbeats too soon. Dear child,

did they  
forget this fight  
was not with flesh and blood? Did they believe that

darkness  
would be biased,  
and spare your kind of flesh and your kind of blood?

Did they  
believe the badge  
holy? Like it would pardon your killers' sins

for them?  
Clean as never.  
Innocent as always are. As they always

will be.  
What other grim  
profession can call murder its target, and

its tool?  
Poor slain body.  
Cursed is the world that already had caskets

your size.  
Fit you brown-boy  
perfect. But where was the hashtag to lay your

name in?  
All lives matter  
spoke no words of your memory. Shed no tear.

Their mouths,  
preoccupied  
with cumbersome arguments. No room left for

mourning.  
For lamenting.  
For speaking of you, who died such a black death.

Oh child,  
c'mon round here  
now. Your name gets a seat at the spade table.

Your name  
gets a plate at  
the BBQ. We'll call you ours if they won't.

Welcome  
to this ugly  
club, of names grieved only by us and heaven.

# CASTING CARES

Let's be honest  
Let's not pretend this isn't ugly  
When it is

I promise  
You can call pain by its name  
Without wounding your tongue

You can confess your fear  
Without forfeiting your faith  
Or offending your Father

He won't run away  
He wants to hear  
Tell Him all about it

# HOUSE RULES

We stack cards in Uno.

Get caught slipping, and you might find yourself drawing all night.

Don't worry, we'll wait.

And ain't no trust among us so you gotta count each one out loud.

In Monopoly, trades are in no ways limited to the actual game.

I once convinced my little cousin to give me Park Ave.

for taking dish duty that night.

This isn't cheating. It's good business.

Don't be a hater.

Spades stick around here.

You need ten to score in bones.

We do not encourage violence but spoons is a big kid game

And you've gotta do what you've gotta do sometimes.

We know these edicts are only canon here.

My fingers can trace the lines that border our sovereignty.

On another side of town, I hold playing cards like a collection  
of passports.

Grateful for the friends who share their space and customs with me.

Endure my trash talk and call me kin.

Teach me your ways and take these L's.

I'll gain mine elsewhere, I promise.

I love house rules.

It's proof that joy is a law in every home that has them.

They are a witness to the formula for gladness

Families mine out of spending time together.

Evidence of just how malleable a rule can be among loved ones.

Soft metal handrail, more guidance than governance.

Fruit of Spirit, against such there is no law.

Who can fashion laws in a home they don't have keys to?  
Ask the culture to name its parents and they'll tell you  
    whose house it is.  
My praise fills a temple that welcomes every shade of child  
The Spirit and womb can think up between them,  
But I know the songs I will and will not sing today.  
Know which outfits God has no problem with,  
But my church won't let me preach in.  
Which burdens my brothers and sisters want to carry with me  
And which prayer requests are considered contraband to their ears.

I am more welcome than my culture is.  
Praise God for an acoustic guitar, but what if my feet get light?  
Amen for contemplation, but where do I put the fire and the shout  
    I was raised in?  
Amen for context, and tradition, and the other way around.  
Amen for house rules,  
But who's house is it?  
And where do we expect the pieces of self that we're  
    uncomfortable with to find shelter?

Can we try playing another game?  
Can we swap this tiresome gamble out for something else  
    that's a lot more friendly?  
More humane than weaponized bias?  
Misguided gravity within us  
Indecipherable algorithm embedded in the amalgam between  
    our faith and our politics.

Biblical lament stems from hope that God has more in mind for His people than the brokenness that they find themselves in.

**These poems are a window into that hope.**

Please attend to the voice of *We Sang a Dirge*. It is part window, part bridge: facilitating new sight and giving the possibility for connection and togetherness.

Todd Hunter · Anglican Bishop, founder of Telos Collective

Lo addresses race, protests, politics, and the church's racial history head on. Black, white, Republican, Democrat, millennial, baby boomer, whatever—we, the church, need more voices like his.

Adam Weber · Lead pastor of Embrace Church, author of *Love Has A Name*

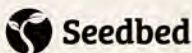
In a conversation one day about lament, Lo redefined it for me as a space for God to shape our pain around his truth. In a few words, he set me on the high holy mountain of lament, and I'm reluctant to leave now that I've found the beauty of this place.

Carolyn Moore · Pastor of Mosaic Church, author of *Supernatural*

Lo Alaman occupies one of those rare, sacred spaces that the church so desperately needs: the prophetic office. Like the prophets of old, he does it in a poetic form that reaches down into our inner life and demands reflection, change, and transformation.

Timothy Tennent · President, Asbury Theological Seminary

Lo Alaman is an artist, author, and speaker. He began following Jesus in 2011 and has committed his life to sharing the message of God's grace. As a creative, he uses art and dialogue to create space for dreams, worship, doubts, and conversations that lead to connection among believers and connecting to the heart of the Father. Lo is Erika's husband, Emmy's dad, a son, a brother, and a friend.



seedbed.com

ISBN 978-1-62824-845-6



9 781628 248456