

# LOVE PERIOD.

WITH REV. DR.  
JACQUI LEWIS

Why Our Tears Matter with  
Rev. Ben Perry

Jacqui Lewis: Hey, everyone. I'm Jacqui Lewis, and I am the host of Love Period, a podcast produced by the Center for Action and Contemplation. This is our fourth season. And in this one, we're thinking about how to reframe and reclaim Christian as a religion of love, as the religion of Rabbi Jesus. What about if we took it back to Jesus and took it back to love? What if we take it back to scripture that elucidates this beautiful movement of love and justice? Join us this season for beautiful conversations with folks across the spectrum to talk about what's love got to do with scripture, and what scripture got to do with love. My guest today on Love Period is the Reverend Ben Perry. Ben is Minister for Church Growth and Media Strategy at Middle Church, and also the author of Cry Baby: Why Our Tears Matter. And because we're exploring scripture and how it undergirds our faith in this season, we'll be talking with Ben about how scripture inspired his book, and what tears have to do with our faith. How are you. Ben?

Ben Perry: I'm good. How are you doing, Jacqui?

Jacqui Lewis: I'm good. I'm good. I'm so glad we get to talk today. How tired are we from the end of the program year as we record this? How's our bodies doing with the juneteenth/pride slash world on fireness, how are you doing?

Ben Perry: Yeah. Weary is, I think, a word that immediately comes to mind. It's the relentlessness of all of it again and again and again. And I was reflecting this morning, as I was praying and singing some hymns, that I think particularly in these weary times, it's actually when I appreciate and am most grateful for my faith. When things are better and lighter, I still rejoice and take solace in my relationship with God. But it's actually those moments when I feel like I just can't wake up and do it all over again, that ability to pray and root myself in a tradition that is much older and deeper than me becomes absolutely crucial.

Jacqui Lewis: I totally get that and would agree. And I don't know about you, Ben, but in times these, where it feels like, I would say as an African American human in this nation, I'm pummeled, pummeled every day. I was talking with John about that this morning. Just every day, how many different aggressions, micro, macro, medium? How many will there be today? How many paper cuts? How many pinches? Pick one. How many splinters? And as we're speaking, we just found out that the Supreme Court gutted affirmative action. So I find myself almost feeling like praying, connecting to God is my in and out breath. I just have to almost make a sacrament of this inhale God, right? This exhale God, this inhale spirit of the living God fall fresh on me, this exhale, breathe on me, breath of God, because I don't know that I could breathe at all if I didn't do that.

Ben Perry: It's interesting you're talking about breathing as a liturgical, right because that's very much, as I was writing my book on crying, how I started to think about my tears. These ways that we're able to root in our bodies into a embodied spirituality, something that's dynamic and in process just like God is in process. I used to think of tears as a destination, but more and more, when I reflect on my own crying and the tears I see in others, it's this movement, the physical moving through of the shit that gets stuck in our bodies. There's a liturgical aspect to that, something that we can return to again and again to help us move through all the shit that gets lodged.

Jacqui Lewis: You just said gets lodged, and someone's going to be deeply offended when I say this. But yet

it's Love Period. And we do things. We say things. I was so... It's been a really tough few days just moving, Ben, packing, moving. My dad is really sick. Something got loose yesterday, today. And I think it was because I stopped and let myself cry that other things that were stuck in my body moved out. And it makes me think about the power of the tears that you describe in your book. And I love us both. The breathe in and out, the tears flowing, the ultimate unleashing of waste that needs to come out of our body, all of that is about our relationship with the holy, right?

Ben Perry: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: So Ben, tell us why you wrote this book, *Cry, Baby*.

Ben Perry: So I wrote the book in the middle of COVID. COVID is still ongoing, but in the middle of the early years of COVID. And I started writing about crying. Early on, I was watching... I was living in Washington Heights, and I was watching them park morgue trucks outside my window because there wasn't enough room in the hospital for all the people who had died around me. And yet that overwhelming, harrowing grief was not reflected in the news reports that I was seeing. It was not reflected in the relentless drive towards normalcy of it's time to go back to work. It's show up on Monday and do your job. And now, I'm very fortunate to get to work for a place like Middle where we actually talk about things, but I was talking to other friends who would talk about showing up to their job and people acting like nothing had happened.

And I was reflecting on a time in my life when I was so dead to what I was feeling, that I didn't cry for a decade. And how when I began seminary, I taught myself how to cry again. I taught myself how to feel again. And I wrote an essay for the Washington Post that used that experience I had of moving through that process, of learning how to cry, learning how to feel again as a microcosm for what I thought culturally we needed to do, that we all collectively needed to learn how to name the grief that was surrounding us, that was enveloping us in a way that we clearly, clearly were not. And an editor reached out and said, "Hey, would you be interested in writing a whole book on about crying?" And I was like, "Well, I've never thought of doing that."

But the more and more I thought about crying, the more I realized how neatly it mapped onto both my own personal story. The time in my life when I lost my tears was the time that I was most lost, but also how it mapped onto all of these things that I'm so passionate about discussing. Tears became this way to refract conversations about race and gender and class and whiteness and spiritual violence and restoration and renewal and hope. All of that is so wrapped up in our crying, the social ethics around who is given permission to cry around what collective grief has meant to movements act up or Black Lives Matter protests. It just became this vehicle for really focusing in an intentional way on all of these emotions that I don't think are treated seriously enough. I don't think our emotional lives have been given, have been deemed worthy of serious intellectual inquiry. And I think that that's wrong. So I wanted to write a book that tried to take crying seriously.

Jacqui Lewis: I was talking to one of our colleagues yesterday about Sunday worship, which I thought was really, really beautiful. As Ben and I are speaking, it's a few days from Pride Sunday in New York. Had some hiccups around floats and things, but our worship was really, really, really

powerful. And Ben, I was describing to John how much somewhere, his arrangement of somewhere was so powerful for me. And just as I said it, my body remembered how it felt to stand in the sanctuary at Easton Temple, and to watch those 30 or so diverse faces and all their beauty sing. And I cried. I didn't mean to, but it was like a joy that bubbled up. So I just caught myself. And then I was like, oh, don't stop it. Let it go. But it's the kind of beauty, the memory, the joy of that day. So our tears have information about what's happening in us and in the world, joy being one, but also lament, right?

So thinking about this place in Cry, Baby where you say... You refer to talking about the temple's destruction in Lamentations, and you say, "To help us explore the unimaginable grief that Israelites experienced in exile, our professor broke us into groups and asked us to share with one another the last time we wept. When my turn came, I was speechless. I wracked my brain, but I truly couldn't think of the last time tears had even graced my face, let alone when I sobbed in earnest." Maybe thinking a bit about that book, about Lamentations, what about the role of scripture, Lamentations, other texts kind of inspire you in this writing, the role of scripture in your own faith life, Ben, but also in the writing of the book? Can you talk a bit about that?

Ben Perry: One of the reasons why I included as much biblical content in the book as I did, other than I'm a minister and it's something I know how to talk and write about...

Jacqui Lewis: Is that part of your work as a minister?

Ben Perry: It is part of my work.

Jacqui Lewis: Yes.

Ben Perry: But it was also because in the Bible, you have this beautiful picture of a very different relationship to crying and weeping than, I think, our present culture, broadly speaking, occupies right now. If you look at the internal logic, the storytelling, the way that tears show up in biblical texts, it is very clear that the ancient audience who was reading them and writing them did not consider weeping to be a sign of weakness, did not think that vulnerability or crying was somehow a violation of who we're called to be as humans. Very frequently, you know, one of the tropes that is repeated over and over again in texts like Lamentations and other, the post exilic text, or in moments after somebody has died, is they will talk about weeping and rendering of garments, literally tearing the clothes off. That is a demonstration of grief that is one wildly more demonstrative than most of what we see in our present culture. But also, that demonstrativeness is lifted up as evidence of love.

That's what you do when you love something so deeply, and then you lose it. You tear at your clothing in a representation of the way that you yourself have been torn. And I think about texts like Mary Magdalene weeping outside of Jesus's tomb. That story doesn't make sense unless you interpret that weeping as a sign of her faith and love for Jesus. The reason that Jesus appears to her makes her the first person to proclaim the resurrection, is because in this moment, when all of the other disciples flee and

run away, she sits there in that hard place and she cries. It's a mirror of Jesus's own weeping when he arrives by the deathbed of Lazarus. That willingness to sit in the hard place and not to run away from the pain, but to name it and to weep, is very, very clearly, in the writing, lifted up as an example of what it means to live a life of integrity and faith.

Jacqui Lewis: When we were little kids, Ben, and my parents were mom and dad Bible, people of deep faith. We had to memorize scripture. And we cheated with Jesus wept, right? Jesus is weeping at Lazarus' death, but also weeping when he comes into the city, kind of weeping over the city, disturbed in his gut and weeping over the city is such a kind of incarnate reference to God's own heartbreak and compassion for us all. I love that we serve a God who feels deeply. I love the way the Psalmist says, "My tears have been my food day and night." My food day and night, that caught your imagination, and you write about that. So talk about that a little bit.

Ben Perry: Yeah, I would actually love to link that text to that Jesus and Lazarus text. Because one of the things that's really interesting to me about Jesus when he shows up to Lazarus' deathbed is writing ahead of time. Mary and Martha write to him and they say, "My Lord, the one that you love is sick." And Jesus very confidently writes back to them, "This sickness will not end in death." And then he travels, but it takes him days to get there. And by the time that he arrives, Lazarus has died. And I was talking about this story with a friend of mine and he said something really interesting that I had never thought about before. And she said, "I wonder if Jesus wasn't sure that he could raise Lazarus. Jesus has healed people again and again, but Jesus has never brought anybody back from death." And so perhaps Jesus arrives. And part of the reason why he is weeping is because he was confident that he could heal Lazarus. But now that Lazarus is dead, that confidence has been shaken.

And so what does he do in that period of vulnerability where he doesn't know exactly what is going to happen? He cries. And linking back to the psalmist? I think we are fed in those moments when we are unsure, when our voice is tremulous, and we simply don't know where the road ahead is going to lead us. There is something in the act of weeping that reminds us that there is still love in the world, there is still tenderness, that we are held by the one who created us and connected to other people, that act of weeping in community inspires a reciprocal tenderness. And it's that reciprocity in the act of crying that feeds us, not just the tears themselves, but what those tears mean. They mean that we are still alive. And oftentimes, particularly when we cry with other people, they mean that we are living in community, and that community is the source for resurrection.

Jacqui Lewis: I love that. I'm thinking about the cultures we know where a crying baby is set in the midst of other babies, and they all cry together, and it's like a kind of baptism into communal feeling, right? Yeah. So tears flowing through us is like a sacrament, you're saying, where there's an emptying and a flow through, I'm going to say, remind us we're alive, and also helps us process the pain, the grief of our life. There's a feeding, a nurturing sense of... I love how fancy you got. The psychogenic, lacrimation.

Ben Perry: Lacrimation.

Jacqui Lewis: The psychogenic lacrimation to nourish our minds and bodies. But there's other things, right? I think the tears... Tears mean, in terms of our faith... I love the way you talk about the Joseph story inspired by The Black Trans Prayer Book that interpersonal tears that become political tears, right? Let's talk about that for just a little bit, how the personal and the political are linked through tears, both in your life then and in the Joseph story.

Ben Perry: So just to give a little recap, the briefest synopsis of this queer reading of Joseph that, as I say in the book, I was first introduced to by J Mase III, who is the co-editor of The Black Trans Prayer Book. J has this gorgeous reading of the Joseph story, talking about Joseph wanting a [inaudible 00:20:46] is the Hebrew, which is oftentimes translated as a code of many colors, a technicolor dream code, however you want to say it in English. But actually, the only other place that those words seem are used in scripture refer to a princess dress. And if you re-look at that story with the understanding that Joseph is actually asking his father for a dress, the subsequent events of their brothers beating them and stripping them and rubbing blood over the dress all of a sudden take on an entirely new character, and one that I think is very familiar, unfortunately to a lot of queer people, particularly for trans folks who are too often the victim of violence.

And that's not the end of Joseph's story. Joseph then goes on to continue interpreting dreams. Joseph does not let that violence stop their calling as a prophet. And it is actually that prophecy that predicts the years of famine, that ultimately saves the lives of his father and his brothers. And so you have this gorgeous story of salvation being found in this queer kid who was a victim of violence, who nevertheless was determined to remain faithful to God, and that faith is rewarded. And the tears in the story come in a couple of really interesting places. Certainly there are probably some implicit tears that Joseph shed immediately after he's beaten and sold into slavery. But Joseph also cries immediately before they reveal themselves to their brother. The brothers come in and don't recognize Joseph. And Joseph sees this and goes into a back room and weeps, and in that weeping makes the decision that they're going to reenter relationship, that they're going to test their brothers to see if their brothers have really changed.

And then they cry again after they realize that they have in fact changed. They're not the same people that they were when they beat Joseph. Joseph cries again before they come out and they reveal themselves. And so you have this very personal story about somebody's trauma and the way that they are healing from it, the way they're choosing to reenter relationship with the people who have harmed them. It's just a stunning story, also just in the way that it places the agency for healing on the person who's been harmed, that Joseph gets to choose every step of the way about whether or not they're going to be reentering a relationship. I think there's just lots of things to learn from that.

But sort of rewinding to your first question about the personal being political, I think so often, I'll speak as a queer person, my own personal weeping because of legislative evil or acts of violence or other ways that people I love are being harmed and deliberately harmed by policies whose sole intention are cruelty, that weeping is a reminder in our bodies that this is not the way that God intends the world to be. And I think that is a really important thing, at least for me, is to remember that this is not preordained violence. This is not something that is blessed by God. This is not something that is the way that society is supposed to be structured, that it is a violation of God's intent for our lives. That doesn't erase the violence,



it doesn't make it better, but it does give me the hope that things can be different.

Jacqui Lewis: Sure. That's really, really, really such an important insight, Ben. Of course, it makes me think about all those places and times in history where there's a death, a wounding, a horrific crime. And even in the spaces and places where paid town criers literally like, this is terrible. Let us cry out and proclaim how terrible this is in this weeping, in this tearing of garments, in this black tradition falling on the casket of the death and just really losing it, testifying. This is just not the way life should be. This is an excruciating pain. And so those tears, public and private, say they're witness to actually not God's intention, not on God's watch. Right?

Ben Perry: Yeah.

Jacqui Lewis: You and I spend time at Middle Church talking about race and gender and sexuality and gun violence and things that break our hearts. I just wanted to, while we have just a few more minutes, to talk about where your heart is cracked wide open right now around white supremacy and all the ways it traps us, wounds us, kills our souls. Do you want to just share a bit about what you are experiencing as you look at the world today through your tears?

Ben Perry: I think tears offer an interesting prism to talk about the violence of whiteness. I have a chapter in my book about manipulative tears, deceptive tears. But there there's a phrase I use in it a few times, a predatory vulnerability. And I think that right now, what I see in really widespread ways from the actions of policy leaders like Ron DeSantis all the way down to the individual faith of white evangelicals, is this paradoxical framing of oneself as the victim, reflexively and always, in the same moment that you are using power to inflict devastating violence. And so you have folks who will talk about the persecution of white Christians. That is something that is actually happening in this country.

And then using that imagined persecution to inflict very real persecution on vulnerable communities to say, "Oh, there's a war on Christianity and therefore I'm going to kidnap trans kids from their parents. There is a war on Christianity, and we need to marshal the forces of order to beat back the forces of darkness. And that's why we are going to deploy tear gas and rubber bullets against a community that is protesting because police killed someone they love." That refusal to acknowledge one's own power, and past, that the pretending that one is in fact actually powerless and using that as a pretext and a justification to enact violence, that breaks my heart. And it's such a grotesque distortion of who we are called to be. We have the capacity for so much tenderness, so much beauty, so much love. Our tears can be a gift that reminds us how in inextricably we're connected, that reminds us that there is no flourishing outside of collective flourishing. They can be that liturgical that draws us back towards one another. And instead, people are misusing this predatory vulnerability to deepen other people's grief.

Jacqui Lewis: It is tragic, abomination. That's the word I like to think of right there. Yeah. So Ben, there's a lot to weep about, and I just would love, as we wrap, for you to tell me where your hope is. Where are you finding hope?

Ben Perry: I'm looking outside my window right now, and there are a bunch of birds on our bird feeders, and I am reminded of the Emily Dickinson line that hope is the thing with feathers. Quite literally sometimes just taking a breath and being reminded that I am part of a larger

ecosystem than myself is some place that I personally find hope. But really, the place that I find hope is in other people. I think that community, for me, again and again, becomes that place where hope can be planted again. That if we come together in weeping, that those tears can water something new and different. And so I think about a place like Middle, the way that we can come together and cry together and sing together and march together and do all of that with an understanding that, to quote a prayer, all of us are prophets of a future, not our own.

I think in some ways, remembering that it's not about me, whether that's looking outside and seeing the birds on at my bird feeder and remembering that I'm part of an ecosystem here that is much larger and deeper than humanity, or the reminder that in a community, I'm just another person. And that's okay. That's not something bad. That's not something to be ashamed by. We don't have to be everything. We don't have to change everything, but we can do something and we can do it very well. That, for me, is a place of hope, that reminder that it's okay to cry. It's okay to feel desolation and despair. It's okay to throw yourself on the floor and truly mourn everything that we are moving through because we should not be moving through it. But we don't stay there. If we stay there, then I think we truly are lost.

But that opportunity to really, truly feel and grieve in full, I think can open a doorway that we move through towards a different kind of relationship with one another. And that, for me, is where the hope is, what comes after that dark night of the soul.

Jacqui Lewis: Beautiful, Ben. Puts skin and flesh on the text, weeping might last for a night.

Ben Perry: Joy cometh in the morning.

Jacqui Lewis: But joy comes in the morning. Yeah. Benjamin, Ben Perry, author of *Cry, Baby: Why Our Tears Matter*, and Minister at Middle Church, and colleague and friend, I'm glad to speak with you today.

Ben Perry: Likewise, Jaqui.

Jacqui Lewis: Thank you for joining us for this episode of Love Period. As we reflect on my conversation with Ben, I want to ask you to consider, just as we are reclaiming scripture, let's reclaim our tears as information about our bodies, as testimony to our feelings, and as an invitation to walk a little closer with the God we love.