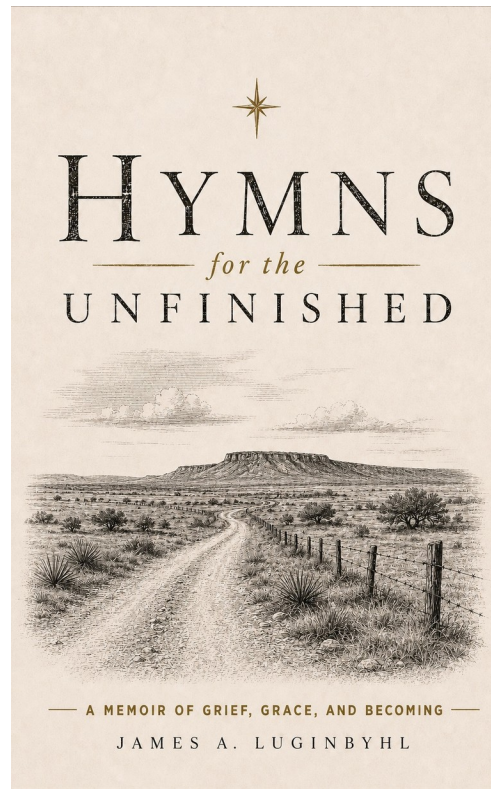


A FOUR-SESSION GUIDE FOR CHURCHES, MEN'S GROUPS, AND GRIEF COMMUNITIES



Hymns for the Unfinished

A Memoir of Grief, Grace, and Becoming

Group Discussion Guide

James A. Luginbyhl

"None of us are finished. Thanks be to God."

WELCOME

A conversation, not a performance

This guide helps groups talk honestly about faith, grief, fatherhood, regret, forgiveness, and grace.

Hymns for the Unfinished does not offer a formula for repairing every broken part of life. It asks whether Christ can remain present when answers fail, relationships stay unresolved, and grief refuses to follow a schedule. These sessions are designed to make room for that kind of honest Christian conversation.

The guide works with Christian men's groups, church book clubs, adult formation classes, and grief-support communities. Participants should read the assigned chapters before each meeting. Leaders may also read a brief passage aloud to begin the discussion.

Suggested format: 60–75 minutes

- Welcome and opening prayer — 5 minutes
- Read a selected passage aloud — 5 minutes
- Opening question — 10 minutes
- Group discussion — 30–40 minutes
- Practice and closing prayer — 10 minutes

Choose the path that fits your group

Christian men's groups: Use all four sessions, with special attention to Sessions 1 and 2.

Church book clubs or formation groups: Use all four sessions in order.

Grief-support communities: Begin with Sessions 3 and 4; add Session 1 if the group is ready to discuss inherited beliefs about strength.

IMPORTANT This is a discussion resource, not counseling, legal advice, or a replacement for a church's established grief-care program. Leaders should follow their organization's safeguarding and crisis-response policies whenever a participant may be at risk.

FOR THE LEADER

Create a room where honesty is safe

Your primary task is not to explain anyone's pain. It is to help the group listen well.

Before the first meeting

- Read the assigned chapters and mark one short passage you may read aloud.
- Decide how your church or organization handles confidentiality, mandatory reporting, and crisis concerns.
- Tell participants they may pass on any question without explanation.
- Have pastoral and professional support information available when the conversation exceeds the group's role.

A simple group covenant

- We speak from our own experience and do not diagnose people who are not in the room.
- We listen before offering advice, theology, or solutions.
- We do not compare grief or decide whose pain is greater.
- We protect one another's privacy within the limits of safety and church policy.
- We allow silence, emotion, uncertainty, and the choice to pass.

When the story involves family conflict

Keep the conversation centered on faithfulness, grief, responsibility, surrender, and love. The group does not need to reach a verdict about a divorce, court decision, former spouse, parent, child, or professional who is not present. The most useful question is usually not "Who was right?" but "What does faithful love look like when I cannot control the outcome?"

"We become impressive before we become honest."

— Hymns for the Unfinished

SESSION 1

What We Inherit

Strength, self-reliance, and the men we learn to become

Read before meeting: “The Things We Inherit,” “The Men We Pretend to Be,” and “The Lies of Strength”

Scripture: Psalm 139:1–12; 2 Corinthians 12:9–10; Galatians 6:2

“Spiritual maturity is not becoming invulnerable. It is becoming visible.”

— Hymns for the Unfinished

Opening question

What message did you receive—spoken or unspoken—about what a strong person is allowed to need?

The conversation

The memoir honors endurance, competence, work, and responsibility while questioning the belief that a man must carry every burden alone. This session asks participants to distinguish the strength worth keeping from the performance that keeps them unknown.

Discuss

QUESTION 1 What did James inherit from the men who came before him? Which parts were gifts, and which became burdens?

QUESTION 2 Where do you see the difference between being useful, being admired, and being genuinely known?

QUESTION 3 What role can competence play in hiding fear, loneliness, or shame?

SESSION 1 • DISCUSSION CONTINUED

QUESTION 4 Which version of yourself do you feel pressure to perform for other people?

QUESTION 5 Why can asking for help feel more dangerous than continuing to struggle alone?

QUESTION 6 What might it mean for grace to give us “a better inheritance” without dishonoring the people who formed us?

Practice: name what you carry

Finish these two sentences privately, then share only what feels appropriate: “The strength I want to keep is...” and “The burden I no longer want to hide is...”

Close in prayer

Christ, search us and know us. Preserve what is good in what we inherited, heal what wounded us, and teach us the strength of being known. Amen.

Notes

SESSION 2

What We Cannot Hold

Fatherhood, separation, control, and faithful love without resolution

Read before meeting: “The Visits,” “The Lies of Control,” “The Last Goodbye,” and “I Stayed in My Seat”

Scripture: Psalm 13; Romans 8:26–27; 1 Peter 5:6–7

“Surrender is not calling evil good. It is admitting that I am not God.”

— Hymns for the Unfinished

Opening question

When have you discovered that loving someone did not give you the power to protect, persuade, or repair them?

The conversation

James describes being a father inside restrictions he did not choose, then making the painful decision to end the custody battle for his daughters' sake. This session is about the spiritual cost of helplessness and the difference between abandoning love and releasing control.

Discuss

QUESTION 1 Where does the memoir show love becoming entangled with control?

QUESTION 2 What is the difference between surrender, resignation, approval, and abandonment?

QUESTION 3 How can someone remain faithful to a relationship when ordinary access or reconciliation is unavailable?

SESSION 2 • DISCUSSION CONTINUED

QUESTION 4 What does fatherhood—or any enduring vocation of love—mean when you cannot perform its ordinary daily actions?

QUESTION 5 Which burdens belong to us, and which burdens must finally be placed in God’s hands?

QUESTION 6 How can a Christian community support someone living with unresolved family separation without offering quick judgments or false promises?

Practice: release without denying

On one side of a page, write “Mine to carry” and name one faithful action available to you. On the other, write “God’s to hold” and name one outcome you cannot command.

Close in prayer

Father, receive the people and outcomes we cannot hold. Keep us faithful in love, honest about pain, and free from pretending that surrender makes loss good. Amen.

Notes

SESSION 3

Grief That Needs Words

Lament, unanswered questions, and the presence of God

Read before meeting: “The Calls,” “After the Ashes,” and “It Gave My Grief Words”

Scripture: Psalm 42; Job 38:1–7 and 42:1–6; John 11:32–36

“This wasn’t a prayer that fixed my grief. It gave my grief words.”

— Hymns for the Unfinished

Opening question

What kind of grief is hardest for you to explain to people who have not lived it?

The conversation

Some grief follows a death; some grief arrives while the people we love are still living beyond our reach. The memoir turns to Job and Psalm 42 not for tidy explanations but for language, companionship, and the presence of God.

Discuss

QUESTION 1 How does grief “stack itself” in the memoir, and how can accumulated grief change the way a person experiences a new loss?

QUESTION 2 Why do some forms of loss receive rituals and community support while others remain largely invisible?

QUESTION 3 What is the difference between honest lament and giving up on faith?

SESSION 3 • DISCUSSION CONTINUED

QUESTION 4 What explanations have you demanded from God, yourself, or other people?

QUESTION 5 Why might God's presence be more sustaining than an explanation, even when it is not the answer we wanted?

QUESTION 6 What would it look like for this group to give grief words without trying to make the grief disappear?

Practice: write a one-sentence lament

Write one honest sentence beginning with "God, I do not understand..." Then write one sentence of hope beginning with "Still, I will..." Neither sentence needs to cancel the other.

Close in prayer

God of Job and the Psalms, receive the questions we cannot answer and the tears we cannot explain. Meet us in lament, and lend us hope when we cannot manufacture it ourselves. Amen.

Notes

SESSION 4

Grace for the Unfinished

Forgiveness, ordinary faithfulness, and peace before repair

Read before meeting: “Where Grace Takes Root,” “Marked Before I Wandered,” and “It Is Well with My Soul”

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8–10; Colossians 3:12–15; Philippians 1:3–6

“Peace no longer waits for everything to be made right. Christ is here now.”

— Hymns for the Unfinished

Opening question

Where have you noticed grace growing in an ordinary or broken place?

The conversation

The final movement of the memoir does not claim that every relationship has been restored or every wound healed. It finds grace in cracked concrete, ordinary prayer, repeated forgiveness, and the presence of Christ before circumstances change.

Discuss

QUESTION 1 Why is the weed growing through cracked concrete such an important picture of grace?

QUESTION 2 What does forgiveness release, and what does it not excuse, erase, or require?

QUESTION 3 James writes that forgiveness sometimes means discovering he has “picked the debt back up.” Why might forgiveness need to be repeated?

SESSION 4 • DISCUSSION CONTINUED

QUESTION 4 What changes when peace no longer depends on every circumstance being repaired?

QUESTION 5 Which ordinary practices have helped you remain present to God during a difficult season?

QUESTION 6 If your life is unfinished rather than ruined, what faithful next step becomes possible?

Practice: notice what is still growing

Name one place that still feels cracked or unresolved. Then name one sign—however small—that grace is already present there. End by choosing one ordinary act of faithfulness for the coming week.

Close in prayer

Christ, remain with us in what is broken and unfinished. Teach us to forgive without denying truth, to receive peace before repair, and to trust that Your grace is still at work. Amen.

Notes

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Invite the author

James A. Luginbyhl is available for church groups, men's ministries, book clubs, and grief-centered conversations.

A group conversation can include a brief reading, James's account of why he wrote the memoir, facilitated discussion, and audience questions. Virtual conversations are available nationally; in-person opportunities may be arranged in Texas.

Possible conversation themes

- The hidden grief Christian men often carry behind competence
- Fatherhood when love remains but control and access disappear
- Faith after loss without easy answers
- Forgiveness that does not deny what happened
- Finding grace in an unfinished life

About James

James A. Luginbyhl is a Texas writer whose work explores faith, grief, masculinity, memory, and grace. Raised beneath the wide skies of West Texas, he is the author of *Hymns for the Unfinished* and host of CREDO, a podcast about what he believes, why he believes it, and whether faith can hold up in ordinary life.

Book: *Hymns for the Unfinished: A Memoir of Grief, Grace, and Becoming*

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Book on Amazon: [View the paperback and Kindle editions](#)

FOR LEADERS Complimentary digital review copies may be requested by group leaders considering the book. Signed copies, group orders, and event arrangements may be discussed directly with the author.

"Christ is faithful to unfinished people."

— James A. Luginbyhl