



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

Earth Filled With Heaven with Aaron Damiani

Season 4, Episode 2 Transcript

[00:00:01.810] - Announcer

Welcome to the Gospel For Life podcast. We help churches make disciples. And now here's your host, Darryl Dash.

Darryl Dash

Welcome back to the Gospel for Life podcast.

I grew up at a church background where liturgy was a bit of a dirty word. It was what other traditions did, and those traditions in our mind were ones that really didn't take worshiping God from the heart very seriously.

And then it was a summer, actually on Sabbatical, that I began attending an evangelical Anglican church. And there I was surprised by the beauty and the power of liturgy. And I realized I had been missing something all these years by writing liturgy off. And that's why I'm so glad today to be talking to the author of a new book called Earth Filled with Heaven: Finding Life in Liturgy, Sacraments, and other Ancient Practices of the Church. And this is a book that's written for, I think, for people who might not be as familiar with the liturgy and why it matters. It's written by Aaron Damiani, who found out at one of the darkest times in his life that the sacraments and liturgy helped him see Jesus again.

So, Aaron, I'm excited to have you here.

[00:01:22.330] - Darryl Dash

Welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:23.770] - Aaron Damiani

Darryl, thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

[00:01:27.110] - Darryl Dash

So tell me a little bit about your background and how you actually discovered liturgy yourself.

[00:01:33.790] - Aaron Damiani

For me, it started with what I experienced as an epic season of Christian failure and burnout. I was a college student, really eager at first, and loving life in the Christian college world, with the speakers and the big production and the ministry opportunities and the intellectual growth and stimulation, the community, all of it was wonderful. And then I hit a patch where I began to have doubts about my faith.

As I learned more about the Scriptures, theology, church history, I started to question what I believed and what I had been given in my evangelical upbringing and didn't know what to do with those doubts. Really felt guilty and ashamed of some of those doubts, but was still trying to work through them. And then I was also starting to burn out in my ministry assignment. About a year and a half in, I was starting to run out of gas. In my first leadership opportunity, I was realizing that leadership was more than about the ideas and the ideals. It was a messy process and I was getting caught up in the mess. And then on a soul level, I think that I was beginning to burn out as well.

[00:02:40.750] - Aaron Damiani

I had a close friend at the time whose father committed suicide, and that was just led to a season of grieving and mourning. And the fires that were burning hot when things were really positive for me were beginning to give way to something different. And so I couldn't feel my way to God anymore. I couldn't think my way to God anymore, and I couldn't lead and serve my way to God. But I did find that moment of all the moments that's when I longed for God the most.

Around that time, I was invited to an evangelical liturgical church by a friend of mine who's at the same Bible college. And I found my way into this Presbyterian church where the liturgy was a gift, an easy yoke of Jesus, where instead of having to come up with extemporaneous prayers from the heart which are good, I love those I was able to receive bold and beautiful prayers that helped my soul pray, especially in grief and loss. I was also given the sacraments where I was chasing and seeing that the Lord was near to me, that he was good even when I had doubts.

[00:03:45.070] - Aaron Damiani

And so for me, what I found was that the liturgy and sacraments of the church were a gift not of works righteousness, but actually of a way to rest in Jesus when your soul is exhausted.

[00:03:58.460] - Darryl Dash

So it sounds like you can relate probably to a lot of people who may not be familiar with liturgy coming from a background, you didn't grow up in a church that use a lot of the liturgy. I guess in some ways all churches have a liturgy, but when we think about liturgy, we're talking about more of a sacramental liturgy. What is it that actually was attractive to you in the liturgy when you began to experience it?

[00:04:21.940] - Aaron Damiani

Yeah, I definitely had that background of liturgy bad. Even though there was a liturgical form to the free Bible Church I was a part of, as well as the megachurch that I was attending right before this liturgical church.

And so what I appreciated and loved about the liturgy of this church was that it was actually joining my voice with other voices around the world and around the congregation in a way that actually it helped me pray Scripture in a beautiful, simple way. And so I was learning to pray. I was actually finding that this liturgical form was getting into my soul. But also there was something peaceful and rich and stabilizing about being able to draw on these prayers and they were better than I could have come up with. So even though I was able to in some ways, let my heart catch up with the scriptures that were stitched together in these liturgical forms, for me, I found that

actually the joy, it was a wonderful container for both sorrow and joy. And for me, it was a safe but rich and deep container for really the wide range of human emotion without basing it on human emotion.

[00:05:34.410] - Aaron Damiani

It was based on the truth of who God is. Nevertheless, it really did exercise the deep emotional experience that I wanted to bring to God, even though I was burned out when I encountered it.

[00:05:45.430] - Darryl Dash

Why do you think that a lot of churches maybe aren't aware of even the fact that liturgy exists. We know that other churches practice it, but we're not really aware of the rich ancient practices that have been part of the church for years. Why do you think that is?

[00:05:59.100] - Aaron Damiani

In some ways it's just been it's like a treasure chest that's been buried and just sitting in the backyard, or we don't know it's right underneath our feet. And as an evangelical Christian, I just found I can't believe that this treasure chest belongs to me. This is a wonderful inheritance, and it's not a unique thing only to the Greek Orthodox or to the Roman Catholic Church. It actually is a Protestant gift that Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and others used passed on, extolled it, and did so intentionally as well. Some of the greatest prayers from the church were written by evangelical Christians who are suffering incredible pain and enduring incredible challenges.

And so I think that when we go to a non-liturgical church and we just don't use it, that's where it is. Use it or lose it. So some of it simply is a lack of exposure. On some occasions, I think pastors are giving liturgy a bad rap, or maybe the culture of the church is maybe the tradition of the church is to give liturgy a bad rap and to describe it as dead religion. One thing I hear often from people who grew up catholic, grew up lutheran.

If you were in an environment that was liturgical and this is a key thing that I've learned along the way, if you were in an environment that was liturgical but did not have joy and

did not have life and didn't know the why behind what you were doing. And if you're stuck there for years, you never want to go back. And so I think that's part of the distaste for the years of lifeless liturgical worship. And I can just say there's a danger in that. There is a danger in letting liturgy do the work for you rather than bringing your whole heart and soul calling on the Holy Spirit and living a mission of life. So I have great sympathy for people who are suspicious of it. And then I also want to give an invitation to both people who are from liturgical and non liturgical backgrounds that this really is a rich way to meet the Lord. It doesn't have to be lifeless.

[00:08:11.510] - Darryl Dash

My experience, as I mentioned, was growing up in a very low liturgy church. And when I began going to an evangelical Anglican church, a couple of things really struck me.

First, I was used to extemporaneous prayers, which you've already said are very good, but a lot of them really just seemed a little bit sloppy. So it was like, "Lord, we just pray..." The word just would show up a lot. "Lord, we're just here today and just pray that you would..." And when I began going to a church and discovered the Book of Common Prayer, I discovered there's such a richness and a thought. You can't beat some of the language in there, and then some of the elements. I wasn't familiar with things like confession of sin and hearing the assurance of pardon from scripture and confessing our faith together. And I just found there was a huge richness that I'd been missing all these years.

Speak to us maybe about what are we missing when we neglect some of these great resources that are part of our church's history. What are we missing when we just refuse to look at some of these deep resources that we've been given?

[00:09:16.180] - Aaron Damiani

Yes, I think all of us long for and more and more we're finding that we long for spaces where we are hearing and talking about what's true. We're no longer being manipulated by hype and by fear, but we're just going into the truth about ourselves and others.

You mentioned the confession of sin. I think people are dying for spaces where they can unload the burdens of their soul into the presence of God. Now, this happens. This can

happen in private. This should happen in private as we meet with people who can hear us confess our sins and declare to us God's forgiveness. But there needs to be a space as well where we can come into the truth that, like we have sinned against God and also to hear the pardon that is ours through Jesus Christ. That exchange, that transfer, is a basic human spiritual need.

And extemporaneous prayers, as wonderful as they are, often lack the gravity that Scripture speaks about sin and pardon with that's one thing. And then on the other end of things, I think that we long for a joy filled, rich connection with Jesus Christ that expresses the depth of our need and longing for Him, which I find is available to us in the Eucharist, in the Lord's Supper.

[00:10:38.350] - Aaron Damiani

And the seal that taking the bread and the wine or the juice represent the seal of our union with Christ is something that we long on a physical, even level to participate in with not just our souls, but our bodies as well. And to do so in that joyful way.

Revelation speaks about the weighing supper of the Lamb, and Darryl, I can't wait for that supper to happen. I can't wait to be part of the bride, as it were, the new Jerusalem that is tasting and seeing that the Lord is good where there's no more sin and there's nothing keeping us from the absolute union with Jesus. But I need a foretaste of that now to keep my hope alive. And I find that in the Eucharist, the Lord meets me and he meets all of God's people, but in a rich cosmic way where the old order is giving way to the new. And we're getting just a taste of it, the windows peeled back just for a moment to keep our souls refreshed and our hope alive and that coming wedding feast.

[00:11:38.440] - Darryl Dash

Aaron one of the things I've discovered is I had an impoverished view of what happens at whether you call the Eucharist or the Lord's table, whatever you call it. And when I grew up, I remember hearing words like "this is just a mere symbol." And those words grate at me now when I hear them. Yes, because there's so much going on at the communion table. So talk to me a little bit about what's the danger in underestimating what takes place when we come to the table and celebrate communion or Eucharistic.

[00:12:07.980] - Aaron Damiani

Yeah, that were just as tricky, isn't it? Not only is it filler for our extemporaneous prayers, but also it can be somewhat of an insult to the gift that the Lord Jesus gave us at great cost to Himself, which was the Lord's Supper. Imagine if we were to do this with a gift that someone we love gave us, and they made us a wonderful piece of pottery, and we'd just say, what is this? This is just dried clay. Or if they wrote a poem for us that was beautiful, and we just said, what is this? Just words on a page. And what we're cutting off when we use that word just is all the love that was intended in that gift, all of the intention in that gift, the symbolism of that gift, which pointed beyond it to something greater.

And when we come to the Lord's supper, even if we don't believe, for instance, that the Lord is present in a special way, as I believe, even if you don't believe that if we were to denigrate it as just bread and wine or putting our attention on what it isn't versus what the Lord intended for it to be, and at the very least, he wants us to be proclaiming his death and his resurrection until he comes by taking this meal.

[00:13:21.000] - Aaron Damiani

And he wants this meal for us to be a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, where, as Paul describes it, as a true participation, where his cross, the gift of his life, is a treasure that we are tasting, that we are owning, that we are living in until we see Him come again.

On the one hand, I don't want bread and wine or the water of baptism to be an idol that we're praying. On the other hand, I don't want to treat it as less than the Lord treated it, which is as a precious, humble way that he meets his creatures with his love, with his grace, with his mercy. So let's be careful with that of repeated word just when we come to his table.

[00:14:07.540] - Darryl Dash

At our church, we have the privilege of celebrating that coming to the table every week, and I feel we celebrate at the end of our service and I tell our people, I almost feel like, man, I am so hungry every week for that part of the service. I always feel like, selfishly

speaking, like elbowing everybody else out of the way and saying, if you don't need this, I really need this. Anyway, let's go to the table together.

[00:14:34.990] - Aaron Damiani

Amen.

[00:14:36.090] - Darryl Dash

Aaron I know there's a danger of making all of this about us. I know that we're all feeling that there's stress and consumerism busyness and loneliness and liturgy and all of this. It's not meant as a life hack, and yet it does help us. So speak to some of the ways that without seeing it as a way to improve our lives or making it about us, how can the sacraments help us deal? Let's help us deal with the isolation we're feeling, with the restlessness that we're feeling that modern culture can't solve for us.

[00:15:09.070] - Aaron Damiani

Yes, it's so true that it's not a life hack. We're tempted to treat everything as a technique for life enhancement and optimization. It's a temptation that I have. And what I love about seeing the world sacramentally and living our life with the church, with the people of God, around the world and throughout time, is that it gives us a broader view of the story that we are part of. And not just for inspiration, but on a very practical level, it gives us people to walk through the year with.

So as we're coming up now, we're getting closer to Thanksgiving and then onto Christmas. I think that this is where I see the highlight the most, is that the offer of the self-optimizing Christmas shopping season is have the most meaningful, cozy, yet also perfectly gifted season of your life, where all of your longings for family and connection will come true. That's the promise that's offered, and we all know it comes up short every single time. But the promise of Jesus Christ that beams out at the first Sunday of Advent is that actually this is the time for us to cast away the works of darkness.

[00:16:26.190] - Aaron Damiani

Now in the time of this mortal life, as we await for the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that actually as the church will begin a new year on the first Sunday of

Advent, that will start with a hope filled expectation that he's coming again, and that when we come to Christmas Day, we are truly celebrating Him. And we're going to do so for twelve straight days.

And then instead of going straight into the New Year where we maybe we join a gym, maybe we go on a diet, maybe we start a whole series of resolutions that instead of doing that, we actually stay on the path of following the story of Jesus by celebrating Epiphany, the unveiling of his glory to the nations. And we'll move from there into Lent and we'll continue to progress to that moment of joy filled time at Easter and beyond. Into Pentecost and that story will begin to shape us year by year.

It's not about having a better life. It is about entering Christ's life. And not just as an individual, but as the church. And even though there's sacrifice along the way, starting with Advent and onward, there's also great joy, great simplicity.

[00:17:41.340] - Aaron Damiani

And ultimately I believe that it will shape us to be the unrushed, non-hurried death, resurrection people of God that are ready for his kingdom to come.

[00:17:52.840] - Darryl Dash

That's so good.

I think you've alluded to some of the individual practices that we can use as well. Could you talk about that a little bit? What does this look like in your life individually? Not just as you gather with the church on a Sunday, but how does it actually work out in the day to day living of your life?

[00:18:08.440] - Aaron Damiani

Yeah, I think of one time when I was facing what a lot of church planters deal with, which is that your Sunday space might be being taken away from you and you might need to find a new space. And I remember one morning when I was finding this possible news out and feeling the anxiety of what was to come or what could be coming. And what I found was that the practice of daily morning prayer, where it's not quite a Bible

study, but it's a chance to pause in the grace of God and to have your heart and your mind be lifted into something higher than what you're experiencing that day. I decided that I would do Morning Prayer, the daily office at our worship site that I was afraid of losing. And I just, in some ways, took my Book of Common Prayer and began to just walk around the building and pray the prayers for the day. And each morning and evening, the Book of Common Prayer assigned a psalm to pray. And one of the psalms that day for that particular morning was a psalm that celebrated the glory of God and the coming of His King.

[00:19:16.230] - Aaron Damiani

And what that did is that just helped me in some ways to have my prayers move beyond the immediate circumstances of my life, which I was trying to survive. I was trying to survive in my personal and professional life.

And boy, this daily office was actually helping me. It was pointing me to scriptures that have nourished god's people for thousands of years, pointing me to something greater, a greater kingdom than my own. And it was inviting me to pause in the presence of God rather than to get productive and to look for new worship spaces or to make a bunch of phone calls. It really was to start with God and his kingdom. And so for me, pausing there's the traditional ways to pause in the morning and in the evening and often at noon time as well, and at bedtime, really four times a day, which I'm rarely doing four times a day, but I do find that the heartbeat of fixed our prayer helps stabilize my soul.

And also it's like a metronome as you're learning piano, it keeps you to keep it trains you to keep time not just on Sundays, but in the Monday through Saturday reality that the grace of God is pulsating through our life and it helps get in step with how he's operating in our world.

[00:20:32.670] - Aaron Damiani

I find that just to end this out on your question here, one of the most simple, ancient ways that Christians have begun their day is actually at night. And so sometimes as a family, we'll light a candle when we come to family dinner and pray. Something called it's called O Gracious Light. It's one of the oldest prayers in Christianity and it celebrates that the light of Christ reigns and rules over all the earth. And so even as we are laying

down our work, he's just beginning his. And then from there we just celebrate that. We're resting, God's working, and when we wake up, we're joining his work, we're joining his day.

[00:21:13.310] - Darryl Dash

So Aaron, talk to somebody who might be an individual who doesn't go to a liturgical church and they might be interested in beginning to learn more about this. Other than reading your book, where would you tell them to be?

[00:21:25.300] - Aaron Damiani

One thing that you can do is that you can pick up a copy of the Book of Common Prayer and I'd recommend the 2019 version. There's other versions out there you can also, for what it's worth, pick up a Lutheran Book of Prayer or pick up the Puritan Valley of Vision and begin to use those in your devotional time. Begin to just leaf through some of these old prayers and experience the richness of them yourself. You could bring them even into your small group. If you have a small group that has a time of prayer, you can say, hey, can I end at our time of praying for one another with this? We call them a collect, which it's a short, compact prayer that collects the prayers of the people of God. Pray one collect at the end of those.

And so I find that the Prayer Book is a really rich resource for this way of living. It does require a little bit of explanation. And so there's a Daily Office app as well that you can download for free on your phone that as you open it, it just automatically loads the prayers and scriptures for that day and that time of the day.

[00:22:30.570] - Aaron Damiani

And you can scroll through and say, okay, here's where the confession of sin is and here's where you say, thanks be to God. That would be one practical way. There is a soon to be published free resource that I'm going to be offering called "The Beginner's Guide to the Liturgical Year," which is a very basic introduction to each of the seasons. So people can put it up on my Twitter as soon as it's available. And it offers a prayer that you can pray, a very simple practice and as well as Scriptures to meditate on in each season of the church year.

[00:23:08.060] - Darryl Dash

And now speak to a pastor who might not be thinking of switching to a more liturgical denomination, but wants to introduce some of these practices within the church that they pastor. So what counsel would you give to that pastor?

[00:23:21.160] - Aaron Damiani

Similar is that start with the prayers, because that's actually where we have a lot most of the overlap between sacramental and evangelical is the fact that we both pray and we both love to sing. And so you can even take some of the some of the basic prayers that you find in a worship service, say from an Anglican. You could put it to worship, or you can just invite people to pray it together and explain why you're doing it.

Explain, hey, this is actually a way for us to join in with a global church and with a historic church. This isn't dead religion. These are Scriptures that are stitched together with prepositions that are shaping our souls.

Another thing that you can do as a pastor is simply increase the frequency, like you've been doing, Darryl, of how often you do the Lord's Supper. And I think both of us could say it's not going to cheapen the experience of the Lord's Supper by having it more frequently. It's like a date night with your wife. The more often you're investing in this, the more rich you're going to find it. So I would say more frequent communion maybe.

[00:24:25.830] - Aaron Damiani

And I also recommend as well for preaching that some of the eucharistic overtones in the Old Testament, if you look at the way the Lord met God's people in salvation history. I just like preaching those old narratives of the manna from heaven or Israel passing through the Red Sea and pick up the ancient Christian commentaries that IVP puts out and read what the church fathers wrote about those passages. They really did see a lot of Jesus Christ in those texts. And so preaching is one way that we can be pointing to Jesus Christ and also helping people enter into the story that we're all a part of and participating in when we celebrate the sacraments.

[00:25:08.650] - Darryl Dash

That's really good advice, so thank you for that.

Aaron, you wrote this book, and I'm not sure what you expected in terms of the response to it, but have you been surprised at all by the response? Have you had any stories of where maybe weren't expecting a positive reaction and you were pleasantly surprised by the warmth?

[00:25:25.900] - Aaron Damiani

I find that it has been pretty readily received without too much controversy, and I will see if that changes. But I think I've been surprised at the openness, and I experienced this to my first book on Lent. It was inviting evangelical Christians to practice Lent in a way that was not dead works. I found that most people were actually ready not simply for more religion, they were ready for more of Jesus. And I've been surprised and grateful for that.

I think the thing that I have had on my heart the most, or maybe one of the things I've had on my heart is the deconstructing Christians. And I think my prayer was that, lord, not only do I want to introduce all evangelical Christians who are interested into these ancient practices, but I have a special heart for those who are doubting their faith, deconstructing their faith and wondering if they should walk away from the church altogether. And whenever I have heard someone say that reading this book has helped them deepen rather than deconstruct their faith, that always really encourages me. And whenever I hear a pastor say, this actually really helps me explain why we're doing this, that also very much encourages me because I just want to build up the church.

[00:26:44.360] - Aaron Damiani

She's been through so much pain in recent years and is being challenged right now. So my biggest hope really was that the church would be built up and encouraged and especially the people who would be most tempted to walk away from her would return to her with a fresh ability to see how beautiful she is in Jesus Christ. So that's my prayer and that's my hope.

[00:27:07.240] - Darryl Dash

Mine too. I hope that book accomplishes that. Thank you for your ministry.

Aaron, I wanted to ask you a couple of personal questions as we wrap up here, and I want to ask you what you have been learning lately. It doesn't need to be necessarily book learning, but what has not been teaching you lately?

[00:27:22.470] - Aaron Damiani

I love that question. One thing that I've been meditating on a lot and it's been a challenge and an encouragement to me is the connection between forgiveness and hope. And as we as I am able to step into forgiveness, as I am able to step into releasing judgments against other people, especially those who have hurt me or have hurt people, I love that actually my hope in Christ is strengthened.

And I was really challenged this summer. I took a sabbatical and I just found myself reading books about forgiveness and also not just about forgiveness, but also justice and how forgiveness of justice are linked together. And so loved Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book No Future Without Forgiveness, where he shared stories of South Africa coming out of apartheid, which was institutionalized racism and a lot of violence, and some of it in both directions. But the process of telling the truth, repenting, being forgiven, extending forgiveness, and actually how that is the kingdom of God. That's how the Lord wants to renew society, is by is through the forgiveness of sins, receiving it and offering it and freedom. And as I've read about this and as I've been preaching through this, I just found that the Lord's been making my heart more and more tender in places where it's been hard, and I'm grateful that he's been doing that.

[00:28:48.640] - Darryl Dash

That's something all of us could benefit from, thinking about forgiveness. So I appreciate that.

What's been encouraging you lately?

[00:28:55.590] - Aaron Damiani

One thing that's been really encouraging to me is the next generation. I have a lot of hope for the next generation of Christians and especially those that really do want to follow Jesus with everything they've got. Every generation, I think we hold our breath a little bit now that I'm watching my own kids grow up and I'm watching the 20 somethings in my church come of age that I'm the one holding my breath now. And so what I'm finding is that there is a willingness to be a resilient disciple of Jesus even in a post-Christian setting. Even when there's a lot of upheaval, even when there's a lot of scandal. There are people saying, we are with Jesus and we are seeking his kingdom and we want to be disciples and we want to be faithful and we want to live. Sacrificially.

And so what I'm seeing is a pretty actually sacrificial generation being raised up who are willing to give their lives to Jesus and his kingdom, whether inside or outside the church. And so they inspire me and I want pardon me very much to equip them and to bless them as much as I can with the time that I have to be in relationship with them and in some cases to be pastoring them.

[00:30:09.750] - Darryl Dash

There's a lot of bad news out there, but that's really good news. And I would concur the next generation is very encouraging. So, yeah, praise God for that.

[00:30:17.200] - Aaron Damiani

Absolutely.

[00:30:18.710] - Darryl Dash

Really appreciate your ministry. Where can people learn more about you and about your book?

[00:30:24.410] - Aaron Damiani

For me and the book, you can go to my [Twitter](#). Aaron Damiani it's a lot of vowels, but if you type into Google, you'll find it. And that's where I'll put book news and personal updates. You can also find our church at ImmanuelAnglican.org. Or just Google

Immanuel Anglican, Chicago. And there you'll find church updates. Our church has a pretty strong Instagram game and you can get sermons, videos and ministry updates.

[00:30:49.030] - Darryl Dash

I hope it will be the last book that we read from you and I really appreciate this one. It's been a passion of mine for a number of years and I'm really grateful for another tool that's going to be helpful for people like me. So the book is called Earth Filled with Heaven: Finding Life in Liturgy, Sacraments, and other Ancient Practices of the Church. Aaron, thanks for joining us today.

[00:31:08.070] - Aaron Damiani

Thank you so much for having me. Darryl, it's been a pleasure.