

LAMENTATIONS: GOD GUIDED GRIEVING

Stonebrook Church — 7/26/2015 — Matt Heerema

Today we're continuing our series on "The Forgotten Books" with everyone's favorite devotional read: Lamentations. I don't know about you but I haven't typically considered Lamentations a "go-to" book when I'm looking for some encouragement from the scriptures. In my bible reading plans, Lamentations is one of those that I tend to just kinda coast through without much engagement because frankly I have a hard time relating to its contents. Anyone else?

There are a few verses here and there that you see on coffee cups and inspirational posters, and for awhile in my early college life Chapter 3:27 was something of a life verse: "It is good for a man to bear the yoke [of God's discipline] while he is young." But Lamentations is not a book I've devoted a lot of time or study to.

Lamentations is hard to understand if you don't know what it is referring to. And once you know what it is referring to, it can be a little hard to relate to.

My hope today is to bring some light to this book so that you can not only appreciate reading it, but find the hope, endurance, and instruction that it is meant to bring to us.

[PRAY]

PRELUDE AND CONTEXT

To get in to the Lamentations, we need to back up about 800 years, give or take.

Just before Israel was to come out of its Exodus wandering in the desert, into the promised land, Moses preached a very long sermon to the entire nation, reminding them of where they had come from, what God required of them, and what they were to do once they were in the promised land. We have this sermon recorded as the book of Deuteronomy.

In this sermon, Moses reiterates God's law, the blessings for living by it, and the curses for failing to live by it. I want to read a section of the curses for you, because, to make the long story of the Old Testament very short: Israel disobeyed, repeatedly, over the course of generations, and these curses were brought about, and are the reason for Lamentations.

Deuteronomy 28:45–57 (ESV)

45 "All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you. 46 They shall be a sign and a wonder against you and your offspring forever. 47 Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things,

48 therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. 49 The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, 50 a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young. 51 It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed; it also shall not leave you grain, wine, or oil, the increase of your herds or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish.

52 “They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the Lord your God has given you. 53 And you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters, whom the Lord your God has given you, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you.

54 The man who is the most tender and refined among you will begrudge food to his brother, to the wife he embraces, and to the last of the children whom he has left, 55 so that he will not give to any of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because he has nothing else left, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in all your towns.

56 The most tender and refined woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because she is so delicate and tender, will begrudge to the husband she embraces, to her son and to her daughter, 57 her afterbirth that comes out from between her feet and her children whom she bears, because lacking everything she will eat them secretly, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in your towns.

Moses warned the Israelites of these things and for the next 800 years (give or take), Israel strayed from God’s commands, the prophets warned, Israel would repent for awhile, and then rebel again, and eventually, in 587 BC, all of these things that Moses warned about came true.

Jeremiah 2:9–11 (ESV)

11 Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for that which does not profit.
12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
declares the Lord,
13 for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Jerusalem was sieged and the temple was destroyed by king Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire, and most of the citizens were taken away into captivity in Babylon.

Lamentations is an expression of grief for the horrors the people of Israel experienced during that attack.

Tradition has it, and we have no real reason to doubt that the Lamentations were written by the prophet Jeremiah, sometime very shortly after the fall of the city.

CONSTRUCTION

Lamentations, you'll notice is divided into five chapters. Most of the time in the Bible the chapter divisions are useful, but added later, not by the author of the book, but by a monk or scholar who wanted to give us some tools for digesting the book. Verse numbers came even later, and are even more arbitrary, sometimes even obscuring a proper understanding of a passage, but Lamentations is different. The book of Lamentations is actually a collection of five poems. Hence, five chapters. Each chapter is an individual poem, and is self contained, complete, with a beginning and an end. However, the five belong together and are meant to be read together, probably a lot like an album of songs. This one is an EP. The five poems, while separate, have a sequence that I'll get into in a little bit.

THEME

The theme of these lament-poems are, as I mentioned, an attempt at coming to grips with the destruction of Zion, Jerusalem, the city of God. They are a cry out to God in the midst of their pain and confusion. In fact the book's traditional title is the first word of the first chapter: "HOW!" or "ALAS!" an exclamation.

My main point today is that God gave his people these poems as a guide for their grief.

God knows how we are made and what we need, so much better than we do, because He made us. And He knows that when we experience something painful, something sad, or something frightening, we need to express our pain, sadness, fear, and anger!

Lamentations is a remarkable teacher for us in the way the lamenter goes about this. I want to talk for a bit about the artistry of these poems, their craftsmanship, because there is something helpful to be learned here.

ARTISTRY

Acrostic and Meter

You'll notice that each chapter of Lamentations has twenty-two verses (except chapter three which has sixty-six, more on that in a second). The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters. Each of these poems is what is called an "acrostic", each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. You could

think about it with the English alphabet as “A through Z”. (Chapter 3 is arranged as twenty-two clusters of three verses, each of the three verses begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. Think rapid-fire “A-A-A, B-B-B, C-C-C” and you get the idea.

Further, each of the poems is crafted with the same rhythm, or meter. That meter is a “3-2” rhythm “1-2-3, 1-2, 1-2-3, 1-2, 1-2-3, 1-2” that was commonly used in dirges or other poetry meant to express sorrow, and is intended to give the feeling of limping: “1-2-3, 1-2, 1-2-3, 1-2, 1-2-3, 1-2”.

All that to say that these poems are highly crafted, very refined, easily memorized in the Hebrew.

These are not emotional outbursts. They are carefully crafted pieces of art. Meant to fully and completely express these emotions “from A to Z”. (The significance of using the full alphabet is that there is a sense of fullness, or completeness to the expression.) There is craftsmanship and art here intended to bring order to the chaos of these emotions. To help guide the expression of them toward a purpose and an end.

Structure of the whole

The five poems are arranged thematically as well, with the third poem being the climax and central focus of the collection. Chapters one and five share a theme, chapters two and four share a them, and chapter three has its own focus, which is arguably the central purpose of the whole.

There are many different points of view expressed in the poems as well. The situation is looked at from all sides: an onlooker observing the situation. Someone in the midst of the suffering describing it. The city itself is personified as speaking. Chapter five is interesting: it is the only one that speaks with the “we” voice.

The uniqueness of chapter 5

That isn’t the only different thing about chapter five either. Chapter five is not an acrostic poem, and does not have the same meter. It is a rapid fire series of couplets with no other structure. It is as if, at the end of this highly-structured series, chapter five dissolves into chaos an obliteration.

I go into all this detail on the construction and artistry of Lamentations because I do think it is vital to the overall purpose and intention of the poems.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the lamentations are to give full and appropriate expression to the depths of all the emotions the destruction of Jerusalem caused for Israel.

- Expression of horror and disgust
- Expression of sorrow and anger
- Expression of repentance and humility
- Expression of trust and reliance in the midst of it all

Some verses to highlight, just a sample of the intensity of tone and language and content:

Lamentations 1:1–2 (ESV)

1 How lonely sits the city
that was full of people!
How like a widow has she become,
she who was great among the nations!
She who was a princess among the provinces
has become a slave.

2 She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has none to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
they have become her enemies.

Lamentations 1:17–18 (ESV)

17 Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is none to comfort her;
the Lord has commanded against Jacob
that his neighbors should be his foes;
Jerusalem has become
a filthy thing among them.

18 “The Lord is in the right,
for I have rebelled against his word;
but hear, all you peoples,
and see my suffering;
my young women and my young men
have gone into captivity.

Lamentations 2:11–12 (ESV)

11 My eyes are spent with weeping;
my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out to the ground
because of the destruction of the daughter of my
people,
because infants and babies faint
in the streets of the city.

12 They cry to their mothers,
“Where is bread and wine?”
as they faint like a wounded man

in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out
on their mothers’ bosom.

Lamentations 2:14 (ESV)

14 Your prophets have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes,
but have seen for you oracles
that are false and misleading.

Lamentations 2:17 (ESV)

17 The Lord has done what he purposed;
he has carried out his word,
which he commanded long ago;
he has thrown down without pity;
he has made the enemy rejoice over you
and exalted the might of your foes.

Lamentations 3:19–27 (ESV)

19 Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!
20 My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.
21 But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:

22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
24 “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”

25 The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.
26 It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.
27 It is good for a man that he bear
the yoke in his youth.

Lamentations 3:31–36 (ESV)

31 For the Lord will not
cast off forever,
32 but, though he cause grief, he will have
compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
33 for he does not afflict from his heart
or grieve the children of men.

34 To crush underfoot
all the prisoners of the earth,
35 to deny a man justice
in the presence of the Most High,
36 to subvert a man in his lawsuit,
the Lord does not approve.

37 Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?
38 Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come?
39 Why should a living man complain,
a man, about the punishment of his sins?

40 Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the Lord!
41 Let us lift up our hearts and hands
to God in heaven:
42 “We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven.

Lamentations 4:9–10 (ESV)

9 Happier were the victims of the sword
than the victims of hunger,
who wasted away, pierced
by lack of the fruits of the field.

10 The hands of compassionate women
have boiled their own children;
they became their food
during the destruction of the daughter of my
people.

Lamentations 5:8–16 (ESV)

8 Slaves rule over us;
there is none to deliver us from their hand.
9 We get our bread at the peril of our lives,
because of the sword in the wilderness.
10 Our skin is hot as an oven
with the burning heat of famine.
11 Women are raped in Zion,
young women in the towns of Judah.
12 Princes are hung up by their hands;
no respect is shown to the elders.
13 Young men are compelled to grind at the mill,
and boys stagger under loads of wood.
14 The old men have left the city gate,
the young men their music.
15 The joy of our hearts has ceased;
our dancing has been turned to mourning.
16 The crown has fallen from our head;
woe to us, for we have sinned!

SIGNIFICANCE

So what are we supposed to do with this?

For the Jews

The Jewish faith has historically used the Lamentations as part of their worship. Every year this book has been read to freshly remember and lament the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and after the temple fell the second and final time in 70 AD, Lamentations was used as an annual time to remember and lament and consider the justice and the compassion of God.

That's well and good for them. But what about Christians who realize that the temple is now obsolete and that it has always been God's plan to spread His people throughout the nations to be salt and light?

Insights for Christians

I want to give us two big takeaways here.

Learn to Lament

The first is that Lamentations provides us with a model for appropriate expression of our grief. There are no holds barred in these prayers. But neither are they unrestrained rage. They are very thorough, A-Z! They are carefully constructed expressions of art. They are brutally honest about what is going on and how they are feeling about it.

They took time to craft the expression of pain, and history bears out that Israel took time to revisit it and be reminded of it, and freshly healed by it. This is why we have it preserved in scripture. And I think this is very instructive to us.

We ought to take time to feel and express our sadness. We should not try to move on too quickly past our fear or grief or outrage or pain. We should be careful not to feel we have to be strong all the time and always say "fine!" when people ask us how things are going.

Doing so will lead us to do things to cover up or try and numb our emotion. We will turn to things that are not God to try to quiet ourselves: entertainment, drugs, sex, busyness; we can put many things in God's place in our heart.

God however, asks us to face reality, face our sadness, face our pain, but not alone. We face it by facing Him, in the trust and reliance that the lamenter expresses.

In fact, it was this turning to other Gods that was the primary cause of the fall of the nation of Israel in the first place.

Jeremiah 2:11-13 (ESV)

11 Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory
for that which does not profit.
12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
be shocked, be utterly desolate,

declares the Lord,

13 for my people have committed
two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.

God compares our need for Him to our need for water. We all know the need for water, and what it is to be thirsty. Israel's problem, and in fact the problem of the entire human race is that we are looking for that water everywhere by God himself, the fountain of living water.

Jesus said:

John 7:37b–38 (ESV)

“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ ”

Which leads to the second big takeaway:

Learn to Repent

The second takeaway is that Lamentations is an excellent reminder that no matter how far we have strayed, we may always turn to him in repentance. Lamentations confronts us God’s righteous wrath and justice, but also His compassion, and mercy. We *will* reap what we sow in punishment, if we do not repent, but His mercies are new every morning and His faithfulness to His covenant promises is great.

The prophets warned Israel for centuries to turn back from their idolatry. God waited patiently for centuries. Jeremiah warned the rulers Israel of God’s impending judgement. They refused to listen, and were crushed in God’s judgement through Nebuchadnezzar and the army of Babylon. But Jeremiah also prophesied a coming new covenant. A covenant of forgiveness and mercy.

Jesus returned to Jerusalem about 600 years later, and fulfilled this promise. He, like Jeremiah, called Jerusalem to repent of their man-made religion, and like Jeremiah, He was rejected. He also, like Jeremiah, lamented over their refusal to listen and over their impending destruction.

But it was Jesus, not Jerusalem who was horrifically attacked, disfigured, and destroyed in punishment for the sins of the people. God offers a new covenant of forgiveness and mercy because He took the punishment that should have been dealt on the sinful rebels, including you and including me.

So now, if we look to Jesus’s punishment on our behalf, if we would trust in Him, rather than ourselves do to do the work necessary to make things right between us and God, He promises to be merciful to us and forgive us all our sin. There is no other way. No amount of work you can do will ever make up for it. Your fate, apart from that trust, is the same as Jerusalem’s as described in Lamentations.

CONCLUSION

Let Lamentations guide you in your expression of pain, sorry, anger, regret, or grief. And let Lamentations teach you the kindness and the severity of God (as Romans 11 puts it). Let Lamentations show you the horrific consequences of sin and rebellion against God. And let Lamentations point you directly to the God who will not cast off forever. Whose mercies are new every morning. And whose love and faithfulness are very great indeed.

[PRAY]