

Introduction

This morning we come to the final chapter of Lamentations. Four weeks ago I introduced Lamentations and explained how after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, the book was read each year in the same month that Babylon sacked Jerusalem.

The Jewish people built into their calendar a time to remember this painful event from their history. In Ecclesiastes Solomon writes that there is a time for all things “*a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;*” ([Ecc 3:4](#)). Unfortunately, such wisdom is largely lost in our day.

Our culture avoids discomfort and lament at almost all cost. We believe the lie that avoiding pain brings happiness. But this is not the case. In fact, statistics have shown that depression and anxiety have sky-rocketed in recent decades even as our culture has pursued safety to a higher degree than ever before. Jonathan Haidt’s book *The Coddling of the American Mind* is a fascinating exposé of this reality.

Pre-modern man understood that embracing pain can serve as a tonic to the soul. Embracing times of lament keeps one’s wits about them. The Prayer of Moses in [Psalm 90](#) states, “*So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.*” Wisdom results in learning to number your days and contemplate your mortality, not the avoidance of such topics.

This is one of the benefits of recognizing the season of Lent each year. Just as Jesus set his face toward suffering on the cross in Jerusalem, so too will suffering be an aspect of our lives this side of the Age to Come.

This morning we consider the last poem of [Lamentations. I](#) will do so with an eye to the larger themes of Lamentations as we conclude the book. There are three things present in [Lamentations 5](#) that have also appeared throughout the book as well:

1. God’s people have permission to bring complaints to God
2. God’s people should learn to express their grief properly
3. God’s people have hope in the darkest circumstances

God's People Have Permission to Bring Complaints to God

Verse one of Lamentations five begins, “**Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace!**”. The tone of this opening line is that of complaint to God. It is similar to what is written at the of the Exodus. [Exodus 2](#) states, “During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel **groaned** because of their slavery and **cried out for help**. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God **heard their groaning**, and God **remembered his covenant** with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God **saw the people** of Israel—and **God knew**.” (vv. 23-25)

When you read the Bible you find that God's people are often in distress and cry out to God for deliverance.

This theme pervades the Psalms in places like [Psalm 74](#) where Asaph writes, “**Remember this, O Lord**, how the enemy scoffs, and a foolish people reviles your name. **Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild beasts; do not forget the life of your poor forever. Have regard for the covenant, Arise, O God, defend your cause**” (vv. 18ff).

This theme shows up throughout Lamentations:

[Lamentations 1:20](#) “*“Look, O Lord, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me...”*”

[Lamentations 2:20](#) “*“Look, O Lord, and see! With whom have you dealt thus?...”*”

[Lamentations 3:55-57](#) “*“I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit; you heard my plea, ‘Do not close your ear to my cry for help!’”*”

God's people crying out in complaint also carries into the New Testament. In the early chapters of Luke, Simeon is described as waiting for the “consolation” of Israel to arrive. This means that he was waiting for Israel's savior to arrive. That word, “consolation”, is the Greek word παράκλησις (paraclesis) and it literally means “to ask for something earnestly” or “to plead” for something.

There is a connection with that word and one of the titles given to the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells his disciples that after his death and resurrection, the Father

will send them a helper (or comforter). This word for the Holy Spirit “helper” is παράκλητος (paracletos). It is unsurprising then that as Paul describes one of the functions of the Spirit of God in the life of the Christian he says the following in [Romans 8:26](#) “ the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, *but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*”

Now, I say all of this to drive to a very practical point of application.

- › As Christians, you can take your complaints, your pains, and your groanings to God. He already knows them and he is capable of handling them when you go to Him in distress. The language of the Bible itself, especially in the Psalms, bears witness to this fact.

This is no excuse to go before God irreverently. But bearing that in mind, you can go to God as a young child goes to a loving Father with a complaint about something bad that has happened to them. Even earthly fathers are able to anticipate the needs and the emotional state of their children. How much more our heavenly Father who knows our frames completely.

God’s People Should Learn to Express Their Grief Properly

Verses 2-18 of [Lamentations 5](#) provides a vivid description of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 6th c. BC.

Considering this description will help bring understanding to the proper way you should take your grief to God.

Disinheritance from the Land (vv. 2-4)

The disinheritance speaks to the fact that the people lost the land that was promised to them by God when the Babylonians defeated them.

However, the language here points to something greater as well. The people are described as fatherless orphans and widowed mothers. The Old Testament describes the people of God as a bride and son. As a bride, Israel was God’s

peculiar people. As God's son, Israel had the blessings of inheritance in God's household.

With the destruction of Jerusalem and the people going into exile, these covenantal privileges are no more. They are like orphans and widows.

Oppression, Poverty, and Hunger (vv. 5-10)

These verses again point to both an immediate reality and a broader picture of distress for God's people. It isn't as though they were simply oppressed, poverty stricken, and destitute (as bad as that is). Their entire sense of national identity was taken from them.

They were the people of the Exodus. Those who were once enslaved to Egypt but freed by God.

The narrative is reversed. They go into slavery again under God's judgement.

Degradation, Violation, and Humiliation (vv. 11-14)

These verses highlight the horrors that were suffered in Jerusalem. Reading them should remind us of the comfort of our own circumstances.

Our culture loves to speak of oppression but such talk often comes from those who know little of the barbarity of ancient warfare and pagan religions.

Jerusalem experiences the consequences of having God's protection completely removed.

Grief and Loss of Sovereignty (vv. 15-18)

How does this final description of the devastation in Lamentations instruct God's people to express their grief?

In Lamentations grief and complaint are given a voice, however, they are not given free reign. The poems themselves are highly structured. The fact that there are 22 verses mirroring the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in all five poem denotes that there is a beginning ***and an end*** to grief and complaint. The grief may be full, ***but it does not go on forever.***

The point that I am driving at here is that God's people should learn to set guardrails for their grief and complaint.

We live in an a culture that encourages full self-expression and the free reign of emotions. Theologian and church historian Carl Trueman describes this phenomenon as “**expressive individualism**”. Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor refers to our age as “**the age of authenticity**”.

What is *most* important is that everyone authentically expresses themselves freely.

This inevitably leads to is the free reign of one's emotions and a rejection of anything that could place any restraints on them.

Again, Lamentations offers a better way.

Christians are allowed to grieve and complain to God and to one another. But they should not bow to their emotions and passions as the absolute rulers of their lives.

C.S. Lewis put it well in *The Abolition of Man* when he said,

The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it. (p. 11)

- › You should take your complaints to God and even to one another in the church. But your complaint is never the last word. Allow God to speak to your complaint.

God's People Have Hope In the Darkest Circumstances

The final point to present both from chapter 5 and the book as a whole is the fact that God's people have hope in the darkest of circumstances.

It is difficult to imagine just how dark the circumstances were. No one here this morning has been in a city under seige for months before it was conquered. No one here has been removed from their home and taken into exile as slaves to a foreign power. The extreme grief in Lamentations is understandable when one contemplates the horrors that the survivors witnessed.

But verses 19-21 offer hope despite these circumstances: “***But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old***”.

God reigns forever, God is eternal and infinite and his judgement is keenly felt by our temporality and finitude. God’s wrath seems like it carries forever and it is easy to forget that joy comes in the morning.

Conclusion

Lamentations ends with something of an open-ended question. ***Will*** God restore his people and renew their days as of old, or has he utterly rejected them?

The ultimate weight of the question lands on a hopeful note. Recall back to [Lam 3:31-32](#) where Jeremiah wrote, “*For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;*”

But how can a just God restore such a sinful people? After all, Lamentations acknowledges that their suffering is the result of their own rebellion against God.

In his letter to the Romans Paul explains that God’s righteousness is shown in the *death* of Christ because God passed over former sins. Paul explains that God is shown to be “just” and to be the “justifier” of the one who has faith in Jesus. ([Rom 3:22-26](#)).

God’s people can know that they will not be forsaken by God because, on the cross, Jesus was forsaken when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ([Matt 27:46](#), cf. [Ps 22:1](#)).

You can have hope because the story does not end on the cross, but sin and death are overcome in Christ’s Resurrection. Even in the darkness of death there is hope because the grave is defeated.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!