



Learning to Lament

Lamentations 1-2

Grace Church | 4.19.20

Good morning church, I hope you enjoyed seeing some of your fellow members read our Scripture this morning. We will be doing that by community group, so we may be reaching out to your group soon to ask you to record a similar video.

It's no secret that Lamentations may be one of the hardest books of the whole Bible to read. It's not particularly hope-filled. The two chapters we read today took a while to get through, a nd verse after verse as we heard them together we experienced the sorrow and pain and suffering found there. Why then is the book of Lamentations so vital to the Christian life?

Let's start by considering the question of suffering, and I want us to think through two problems of the heart before we can see God's truth in Lamentations. Suffering is ultimately inevitable, as much of a part of the human experience as happiness is. **And so our first problem we must overcome is that our natural instinct is to hide suffering.** The second sin recorded in Genesis was hiding from the first.. Suffering, as we saw in 2 Corinthians, makes us appear weak, and we hate that. Or, focusing on our suffering seems to strip away our happiness. Suffering can be distracting, hardening our hearts and making us bitter towards others or the world. It can be exposing, showing us where our loves really lie. And so we avoid it, don't talk about it that often. Even Christians are uniquely bad at this: painting over the reality of pain with thinbare out of context promises or slogans. We self-help our way to self-agony. We even tempt those whose suffering is inescapable, the disabled or sick, to coat over their suffering with optimism in the name of Christ. Or, we just don't talk about it. We bring up our physical pain to shield our spiritual pain, because like C.S. Lewis says, "It is easier to say 'My tooth is aching' than to say 'My heart is broken.'¹ Our first problem we must overcome is that our natural instinct is to hide suffering.

Our second problem we must overcome is that when we can no longer hide our suffering, our natural instinct is to be overwhelmed by our suffering. If the second sin in the garden was a sin of hiding and blame, the third sin recorded in Genesis was a sin of passion. Cain was overwhelmed with jealousy and hatred. After he kills Abel and God curses him, what does he say? "My punishment is too much for me to bear." When we cannot hide our suffering any longer, the results of our play-acting come out in striking force. It overwhelms us, we can't bear it. This is the tragedy

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*



of so many who are crushed by their suffering and become bitter, volatile, lifeless shells of their former innocence. The weight of suffering is too big to bury or to bear alone: it will crush you. Our second problem we must overcome is that when we can no longer hide our suffering, our natural instinct is to be overwhelmed by our suffering.

So why is a book like Lamentations so vital to the Christian life? Because it shows us the art of Godward suffering. Did you know that almost one third of the Psalms are songs or poems of lament? When the pain and sorrow of the world inevitably comes calling, we don't have to bury it, and we don't have to bear it. We lament it. The discipline of lament is the Biblical way by which God's people take their overwhelming sorrows straight to God himself. And that, church, is why we need it. This morning we will frame our time in Lamentations by learning to lament. At least in part, as we will see the whole picture develop next week.

The book of Lamentations was most likely written by the prophet Jeremiah. It is a series of connected poems that Jeremiah wrote by the Holy Spirit as he looked out over a destroyed and forsaken Jerusalem. You see, the mighty Babylonian empire had laid siege to the city, starving and isolating the people of God within. Once they were weak and vulnerable, the Babylonians laid waste to the city, carrying off its richest possessions and people to be slaves in their country. The book of Lamentations is the response of Jeremiah, but in it he personifies the city itself. You could say the book of Lamentations is the lament of the people of God, the city of God, and the prophet of God, all rolled into one. And ultimately as the prophet is writing inspired by the Holy Spirit, it becomes the best blueprint for our understanding of Biblical lament. We won't cover or explain every single verse per se, but we will be striving to unearth the central meaning and tone of these poems. So today, from the first two poems of Lamentations, I have three markers of Biblical lament. Biblical lament *asks*, it *sees*, and it *cries*.

Lament *asks* the hard questions.

The Hebrew title for the book of Lamentations is actually a question. It's quite hard to say, but it's pronounced Êykhôh, and quite literally means "How?". The book of how. And you will notice this is how Jeremiah begins his collection of poems. Look with me at the first verse of the book of Lamentations, **1:1**. It's also how he begins the second of his poems, in **2:1**. The first marker of Biblical Lament is that it asks hard questions.

In chapter 1, Jeremiah asks the question "How" of the World. He looks around him, and all he sees is destruction. The city of Jerusalem once was full of people, not it is empty and lonely. The great has been widowed, the princess has become the slave. We must remember that the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem lasted three years. We've been in partial lockdown for three weeks, they were in an oppressive lockdown for three years. That siege sucked the life out of the city and the people. Just as they were starting to starve to death, the enemy broke through and took everything else they had.



Jeremiah asks the hard question: how did this happen? We also see a strong theme in chapter 1 of the enemy. See **verse 5**. The enemies of Jerusalem and Judah have become the head, they prosper. They are in charge.

So often we read statements like this and feel as if we cannot relate. Who are our enemies? No one is out to get us. And yet, I don't think that is quite true. We may not have political enemies at war with our nation, but all around us we are at war. The enemies of sin, of temptation, of apathy, of forgetfulness, all of them press on all sides. And not to mention to enemies of disease, of cancer, of death, of debilitating sickness, of chronic pain, of depression and darkness and anxiety and stress, of loneliness and isolation. We don't sit high in our ivory tower, non susceptible to attack. All of us are just one bad decision from completely derailing our lives. And I believe everyone can relate to what happens when we realize that our enemies have surrounded us. We ask: "How!" How did I get here, how does it seem too late to turn back? And if you are not there, you will be.

Part of lament is looking at the way things are and expressing sorrow. That is healthy and good. We start by asking the question of the world: how did this happen? But we also see that the question of how much also extend past our worldly enemies and onto God himself. Look at **2:1** again. You see, in chapter 2, the tone changes. Previously, the enemy of Jerusalem that Jeremiah laments is Babylon. But now he makes a shift. In **1:5** we saw the prosperity of Babylon, but in parallel form, who do we see described as the enemy in **2:5**? God has become like an enemy.

You see, part of Biblical lament is trusting God enough to be honest with him. In our darkest moments, we must express the feeling that he himself has become like our enemy. We have to ask the question "how" to the highest court, and that means we must bring our questions. What I am not arguing for is the idea that somehow doubt is a virtue, that true Christians are ones who live their lives in perpetual doubt of God. No, what I am saying is that more often than not, it takes more faith to ask hard questions of God than it does to doubt and remain silent. The question that is rooted in doubt says: "are you really good?". The question that is rooted in faith says: "I know you are good, but why does it seem like you are not?". Doubt asks: "Are you really there?" and faith asks "I know you are there, but why does it seem like you have left?"

And this is precisely what is going on in Lamentations. It's a cry of faith, asking the hard questions of God. One author says that the purpose of Lament is to "awaken the soul."² This is our first step. We shake ourselves awake from the numbness of pain by having enough faith to bring our questions to God.

If you are looking for more evidence as to what it means to lament by asking the questions of faith, look no further than the example of Christ. As he bore our sins on the tree, what were his words to God? He asks the question: "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?". In that moment, it is not as if Jesus himself sinned by doubting God. No, rather, his trust in his Father allowed him to be honest. He was lamenting, giving proper time and acknowledgement to the pain and suffering he

² Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*



felt in that moment as he felt the pain and suffering of his people. He was showing us how to lament.

Lament sees the world as it is and God as he is.

That brings us to the second marker of Biblical lament. Remember, lament does not ask blindly in the dark, it asks by faith. And faith is not blind, faith is the lens by which we see the world rightly. Remember last year we preached through the book of Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiastes reminded us in chapter 7 that they way of wisdom is not afraid to take a walk in the graveyard. Because, There is more to be learned in the house of mourning than in the house of feasting.

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart... The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Why is the house of mourning, the graveyard, a better teacher than the party? Because death and mourning come to all of us. It's in our mourning that we have the opportunity to see the world rightly and gain a heart of wisdom. Lament can be our teacher, if we will let it. And the first step of gaining the wisdom of lament is understanding *detail*. If we can bring all the sorrows of our heart to God in detail, we will begin to see how he alone can be the only answer. Notice how the prophet Jeremiah in Lamentations is completely unafraid to hold back his suffering in particular detail.

The first detail he laments is that the comfort of Jerusalem is gone. See **1:2**, there is none to comfort her. **1:3**, there is no resting place. **1:7**, no one is there to help, she is alone. **1:9**, she has no comforter, **1:16-17**, the comforter is far off. **1:21**, no none to comfort. Jeremiah spares no detail, he is unafraid to recount again and again his sorrow. Jerusalem is alone, here sorrow and pain is ever present, and she has no comforter. This is the lowest of the low, and in this we find the reality of the sinful world. If this world is all there is, there is no true comfort for the mourning. When the coronavirus outbreak first hit, several celebrities put together a video where they all sang different parts of John Lennon's famous song "Imagine". It was supposed to inspire comfort for those who were fearful or sick or isolated. Let me jog your memory as to the first lines of the song:

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us, only sky
Imagine all the people
Livin' for today

I cannot possibly see how that song would be a source of hope in sorrow. Because what it leaves out is the reality of the world we live in. It forgets to remind us that if there is no future, if we only live for today, then not only will we find comfort hard to come by now, but there is no comfort to



come either. The apostle Paul says it well in 1 Corinthians 15:19: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." But Biblical lament looks at the world rightly. It says: there is no true comfort in this life alone. When Jerusalem needed it, no comforter came, no rescue came. And we see this most clearly in sorrow. Our place of suffering becomes the lens of wisdom to recognize that if comfort is to come, it must come from outside of this world.

There are many pictures of reality that Lamentations shows us but let's zoom in on one more in chapter 1. I want you to see how all encompassing the sorrow of Jerusalem is. There is no stone unturned. We see this first in the structure of the poem, its form. Three out of the four poems in Lamentations are acrostics. Each stanza starts with a corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Since there are 22 letters, there are 22 stanzas in the first two poems. Jeremiah is writing this way intentionally, the very structure of the poems point out to us the extent of his lament: it is from A-Z, from Alef to Tav. Notice as well the repeat of the word "all" in nearly every verse of chapter 1.

2: all her lovers are gone,	11: all her people groan in hunger
3: all her pursuers have overtaken her	12: all pass by her and do not care
4: all her gates are desolate.	13: she is faint all the day long
6: all her majesty is departed	15: all her mighty men have been rejected
7: all her possessions taken	18: all the people see her suffering
8: all who use to honor her despise her	21: all her enemies hear of her trouble
10: all her precious things destroyed	22: all the evil comes before her

The reality of suffering here is not hidden: it is total, all encompassing. Biblical lament acknowledges that true suffering is serious. Because in the moment, it feels inescapable. I am reminded of the words of the psalmist in Psalm 116: "The snares of death encompassed me". Have you ever felt trapped by your sorrow, pain or suffering? Encompassed? Think of another Biblical example we have: Naomi. After witnessing the premature death of both her husband and all of her sons, Naomi was in total despair. She changed her name from Naomi, which means "pleasant", to Mara, meaning "bitter." Her sorrow was so all encompassing, it changed her very identity.

But Naomi was right in some sense. She was bold enough to name her sorrow, to give it space. Her lament so moved Ruth that she stayed to care for her when no one else would. Naomi would see the faithfulness of God in time, and it started with her refusing to sugar coat. You see, lament sees the world as it is. It recognizes there are lessons to be learned in the graveyard, in the place of mourning. It knows that ultimately, under this fading sun, sorrow will touch all corners of the earth. It is all encompassing. And I don't say this to depress you, I say this to awaken you. Lament is the Biblical model for seeing clearly in suffering by speaking honestly. It shows us the futility of chasing after the answer to our suffering within the bounds of this material world.

The wisdom of lament also helps us answer the question: if this world is so full of suffering and sorrow, who is responsible? Wisdom pulls back the curtains and helps us answer in two ways.



First, we clearly see that the full responsibility of suffering and sorrow falls on our shoulders. It is our willful sin, the sin of Adam that rests in our bones, that is responsible. Look how Jeremiah explains the suffering of Jerusalem, starting in **1:5**. The reason Jerusalem has been defeated and carried away, and thus the reason for all her sorrows, is not hard to find. Jeremiah was not confused. He has served as the prophet to Judah for years at this point. He has been warning Judah of the destruction to come for decades. All of their sorrow is in part due to them as a consequence of their transgressions, a word that hints at their rebellion against God. Jeremiah has pity on Jerusalem, but he knows their sufferings are not unjust. Look how he compares the city and the people to an unclean and naked woman in **verse 8-9**. Perhaps no other verse describes the people's plight better than **verse 14**. Do you see the contrast here, the weight and yoke of sin. We cannot bear our sufferings, anymore than we can bear our sins. The suffering of the world is not random. The suffering of the world, the brokenness of it all, from unjust sentences, to racism and hatred, to murder, even sickness and disease and natural disaster, all of it is a result of sin. When the peace of the garden was interrupted by the willful sin of Adam and Eve, we all fell with them, and the world too.

And so, if we want to rightfully lament suffering, we must learn to rightfully lament sin. Sin is the root of our suffering. Instead of coddling it and dismissing it, the sin of the world should fill us with righteous anger. We see the world rightly when we see it through the lens of depravity. All is not right in the world.

Secondly, we see that our responsibility in sin does not cancel out God's sovereign responsibility in suffering. Chapter 2 zeroes in on this truth. Look with me at **2:1-8**. While we rightfully remember that sin is the root cause of suffering, Lamentations also helps us see rightly that suffering, both personal and cosmic, shows us that God is at work in the world. He is the author of our suffering. Now, this may be hard to hear, but I want you to focus in. Lament is the way by which we acknowledge that our suffering comes from God's sovereign hands, but we do not lament blindly. The city of Jerusalem had no clue what their suffering would bring. But if they were able to see by faith the fruit of it today, they would rejoice, through their captivity God brought them back to himself and preserved the line of David to bring Jesus Christ forth, proving to all who would listen that the preservation and salvation of his people falls squarely on his shoulders and no where else. Suffering, for those whose hope is set eternally in Christ, is not bad news. It is a display of the loving heart of God, who disciplines those he loves and uses trial to bring them to the end perfect and complete and lacking nothing. Christ himself suffering, under the providential hand of his father, because in the economy of the kingdom it is through suffering that we reach glory.

And I know that might be hard to hear today, that your pain has a purpose, but I need you to hear it. Lament is the way by which we express our feelings and learn to throw all our feelings on God who loves and cares for us in Christ, who is not mad at his children, who sees us holy and blameless, but loves us too much to not rip us away through sorrow from the fleeting pleasures of the world. Just as he did with his daughter Jerusalem, God may send us into ruin and exile, but he does so so that we may let go of idols and march forward through the desert into paradise with him.



I could go on and on Church, but you must remember this. Lament helps us see the world rightly, and it helps us see God rightly. He is not caught up in suffering, caught off guard, frustrated by it. He is not you. He has ordained your every step, even when you feel abandoned he is teaching you and keeping you. Lament is learning to trust that truth even when you cannot feel it.

Lament *cries* out in the night.

Finally, we see the example in Lamentations 1-2 that Biblical lament always includes a response. When the night is the bleakest, it does not stay silent. The lament of all those in Christ cries loudest in the darkest places. Instead of giving God the silent treatment, we cry out to him. And the first way we cry out is through *confession*.

We see this in **1:18-20**. Jeremiah closes his lament over the sin of Jerusalem with a confession of sin of Jerusalem. He first acknowledges that although it is God who sovereignly turns the hands of time and even of suffering, he does not doubt God's justice. He is in the right. Do you see what kind of faith this lament has? It trusts God's just character is not one that changes with the tide. He is the same yesterday and today and forever: always just and upright, who can question him? Confession is an acknowledgement of our humility before a holy God. The English poet John Donne once revised the lamentation of Jeremiah in his own words. At this point, he expresses the heart of confession with this rhyme: "But yet the Lord is just, and righteous still, I have rebelled against his holy will."³

Oftentimes, it is in our sorrow and suffering that we run hardest and fastest towards confession. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, showing us that God has not abandoned us after all. Confession of sin requires humility, but it also requires trust. It acknowledges that in bringing sin to God, we throw ourselves at his mercy. What is the Christian response to the reality of suffering? We throw ourselves at the mercy of God in confession, and we see every sorrow as an opportunity for repentance and growth in godliness.

In fact, it is trust that flows from our confession, as we see in the response of the lamenter in **chapter 2**. Again we see Jeremiah ask a question when we look first in **verse 13**: who can heal you? Jeremiah knows, even in his sorrow, that there is only one who can heal his sorrow. The one who has brought Jerusalem to her knees is the one who can restore her. Only God can do it. The only thing that Jeremiah has left to do, after confessing his sin, is to cry out in the night to God in prayer. Read **2:18-19**. Here is where lament always ultimately flows: to prayer. This is why lament is so powerful, so necessary, so healing: because it causes us to exhaust every option but humble prayer. Look how chapter 2 ends, in **20-22**. Perhaps it is the bleakest here: cannibalism, death, no one espousing. Jeremiah receives no immediate resolution, no writing in the sky telling him the meaning of his suffering, no rose colored glasses with which to cheer him up. But he does have what he has always possessed: he can cry out to God.

³ John Donne, *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*



Tim Keller notes of prayer that “When life is going smoothly, and our truest heart treasures seem safe, it does not occur to us to pray.”⁴ But have you ever thought that your suffering and your sorrow might be the means by which God is driving you to your knees in prayer? He so desires intimacy and communion with you, that was willing to go to the cross, and so could it not be true that he might bring you through the depths of night so that you might learn to cry out to him?

Friends, lament is the language of the suffering Christian. It is a tongue of faith, it is an honest prayer in which we throw ourselves at the mercy of God. It feels strange, not to bury our sorrow. But if we are to overcome any burden in this world, it will not be by our own strength. It will be by looking the fallen world of sin right in the eye, weeping and crying and lamenting, and all the while trusting.

You see, Church, the destruction of Jerusalem was a sorrowful sight to behold. But I know a sadder one. Judah was God’s son, but God had a truer son. The Lion of Judah, the true Israel, the one king over Jerusalem, went to his destruction, and all of Heaven lamented, a sorrowful, faithful prayer. Remember how they raised Jesus up on the tree, and think of the sorrow there. Don’t hide it. But neither should you be overwhelmed by it. Because the one who saw it fit to crush him was the one who saw it fit to raise him again. Your eternal suffering and eternal sorrow died there with Jesus, if you would ust repent of your sin and trust in him by faith. And the gospel of Jesus Christ flavors all of our prayers of sorrow.

To Lament is to ask the hard questions, and ask them with the cross and empty tomb in view. To lament is to see the world rightly, and to see how the cross and the empty tomb are reshaping htat very world. To lament is to cry out in the night, and to cry out to the one who cried out himself for your sake. Lament is the language of holy suffering. My prayer is that we learn it together church.

⁴ Tim Keller, *Prayer*.

