



GRACE CHURCH

The Path to Restoration

Lamentations 5

Grace Church | 4.19.20

As I studied in preparation for this sermon, I came across online a story and a video that many of you may have seen this week. The story is of a young black man named Ahmaud Arbury who was shot and killed in Georgia while out on a run. The tragedy and injustice of this story is that Ahmaud was followed and murdered by several men who suspected him of a crime simply because of the color of his skin. The terrifying tape shows how these men waited for him to approach them on his run, stepped out of their car to confront him, and then shot him several times at point blank range. Again, Ahmaud was simply out on a run in broad day light. He did not know these men, nor had he committed the crime they thought he may be guilty of.

Now, as I heard the story, my heart broke for several reasons. First, of course, for this unspeakable tragedy and act of violence. This man was about my age, and targeted and killed simply because of the color of his skin. I cannot understand this fear that many of my black brothers and sisters live with. Secondly, this report may have hit the national news and my news feed, but it doesn't mean that it is isolated. Ahmaud's story is not unique, either in history or in the present. For all the unknown who have experienced this same injustice and whose stories are not heard, we lament. But thirdly, we lament because this act of racially charged murder happened in February, not in May. For three months, no one cared about Ahmaud, save his family and friends. The law enforcement did nothing to seek justice. They did not arrest or apprehend or charge the two men who hunted him down and killed him. We only heard about Ahmaud's story because the graphic video of his death leaked to the internet and it became national news. How many times has this happened and there was no video?

I tell you this story because we should care. It should break our heart to hear of this cruelty and hate and violence in our own country, to know we are capable of this. We should lament for racial injustice, and look into our own hearts to see where our prejudices lie, where our selfish motives might be passively condoning instead of condemning acts of evil like what happened to Ahmaud. It takes spiritual work to disciple racism from our hearts. But I also tell you to illustrate this point: the sorrow and tragedy of an evil like what happened to Ahmaud does not dissipate in a moment. It took three months to even take a single step towards justice for Ahmaud. For some, it never comes in this lifetime. For many, no relief comes. Sorrow often lingers, restoration waits.



We are eager people, too impatient to wait for our videos to download or our food to warm up. We want instant restoration. But restoration isn't simple, and neither should it be. It takes more than time. And here in Lamentations 5, Jeremiah closes out his poems of lament with a reflection on the final state of Jerusalem. He pens this poem with some perspective. He sees Jerusalem as it is, months after the siege has ended. He is not bemoaning the past, he laments the present. Although the first sharp pain of the Babylonian conquest has ended, the effects of it carry on. And so for us, this lament helps us answer the question: what happens *after* our sorrow? How do we carry pains for months and years and lifetimes, without resolution? Because in every suffering, there are at least two points of sorrow. There is the initial sorrow, when the news is broken to us, or when we realize we are living in tragedy of some kind. But there is also the lingering sorrow, that rears its head every once in a while, that comes back with specific memories, that shows its effects over time in ways that we cannot even see. And that is the sorrow we must live with, because it's the kind of sorrow that becomes a piece of us, a part of our story.

Lamentations 5 is less of a poem and more of a prayer. It's a prayer not lamenting the height of sorrow, but the effects of sorrow. It's a prayer, ultimately, for **restoration**. Jeremiah wonders: how long will the effects of our suffering last? When will we be restored? And here is good news for us: God in his providence has provided Biblical lament as not only a way to speak in sorrow, but to move towards restoration after sorrow. Lament is not just for those times when something terrible happens to us. Instead, it should be a regular discipline in our life, pushing us through the days and months and years and decades that follow our immediate sorrow and ushering us into ultimate restoration. So this morning, let's consider two ways to seek restoration in enduring sorrow. First, we pay close attention to the *scope* of our sorrow. Second, we *measure* our sorrow in eternity.

Pay Close Attention to the Scope of Your Sorrow (1-18)

We all carry baggage, sorrows from the past, effects of sin and death and loss and sadness and brokenness and injustice. And so does Jeremiah in Lamentations 5. As he looks over the city of Jerusalem in present time, the siege is over. The initial sorrow has ended, but he is honest about it's lingering effects. Look at **verse 1**. He calls out to God, look to see the effects of our great fall! Months later, we still feel it. The scope of the sorrow of Jerusalem is not limited just to the siege itself. Let's take some time to consider just how the past suffering has affected the present and future of the city and the people of Judah.

Verse 2, we see that they have **no future**. Jeremiah speaks of a loss of inheritance. While this certainly demotes a loss of financial future, the meaning is deeper for the people of Judah. They remember how God affirmed the request of Moses on the mountain in Exodus 34:19.

And [Moses] said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."



What is Moses' request? Not simply that the Israelites would receive a monetary inheritance from God, but that they would receive a relational inheritance in God. After this request of Moses, God goes on to renew and reaffirm his covenant with Israel, promising his forever faithfulness. As he does, he promises as Israel is his inheritance, so he will be theirs. All of this is wrapped up in a promise of *land*, where God assures his people that he will dwell with them in the land he is to give them. To those in Jerusalem, the terrible conditions of the siege were not their primary sorrow. It was the effects. As the Babylonians ransacked the city, it appeared that they had taken not only the monetary inheritance of Jerusalem, but the spiritual inheritance. As they carried off the temple gold, they carried off the very place where God dwelled with his people. They carried off the houses of the people, but more importantly, they carried off the house of God. See, the scope of Israel's sorrow reached down and affected their confidence in their spiritual future. That effect has consequences long after the Babylonians are gone.

In **verse 3**, we see the people of Judah have **no family**. Again, the meaning is two-fold. Many of their sons and daughters have been carried away by the Babylonians to serve as slaves in their society. Many of the fathers likewise were taken away. But the wound is deeper. The physical separation of family corresponds to the spiritual. Judah feels a spiritual orphan, abandoned by God. This corresponds to **Verse 4-6**, the people of Judah have **no provision**. In their covenant with God, they were meant to rely on him for their needs. Like spiritual children, if they were faithful to obey him, he was faithful to provide all the blessing they could handle. But they were not obedient, and so it feels as if they have been deprived of basic needs by their heavenly father. Water and warmth are at the core necessity of human life. God provides them from his own hand: streams and rivers and trees and forests. But now even those common graces have left Jerusalem. If they want water or wood, they must pay for it. Verse 5 shows us the same theme in regards to their beds. They have no rest, no security, no savings account. Verse 6 shows that if they want just to survive, they must go to foreign powers, who seem to have more favor with God than even his chosen people.

Verse 7, they have lost too their **pedigree**. Instead of passing on wealth and wisdom, their Fathers were sinful and wicked men, and now the people of Judah pay for their sins too. Our sins never happen in isolation: sorrow has a trickle down effect. **Verse 8**, they have no **status**. Jeremiah says that the slaves or servants of Babylon, they rule over them. The lowest in the society of their conquerors is now the highest in their society, showing you just how low they have fallen. Because of this, there is no **safety** we see in **verse 9-10**. No one protects them from being taken advantage of when they go to try to barter for some food. Any action they take even just to feed themselves, endangers their very life. They have no **dignity**, **verse 11-12**. Their women are taken advantage of, those who used to be their leaders are lynched and hung in the streets for all to see. There is no respect for the sanctity of life and the dignity and worth of the individual. **Verse 13**, they have no **freedom**. Typically the grinding at the mill was done by animals or at least by slaves and indentured servants. Now even their children are forced to work long hours in slavery, their backs breaking under weights they are too young to carry and bear. **Verse 14**, the people of Judah have no **community**. Before the siege, the older men who cannot work sit by the gate and give wisdom



and teach the children who are too young to work as they play music and give entertainment to them. This is the art of community, the front porch of Jerusalem if you will. AND all of it is lost. **Verse 15**, there is no **celebration**. Before the siege, the life of Jerusalem was tied to their religious feasts, where they danced and sang and worshiped and ate in joy, praising God's provision. Now, the temple is gone, and so are the festivals. Instead of dancing, there is only mourning. Finally, in **verses 16-18** we see there is no innocence. Jeremiah laments the political upheaval of the city, the crown has been removed, and all of it has only served to increase sin. A literal translation of the second half of verse 16 would be "if only we had not sinned!"

Notice a few more things about the honesty of the scope of sorrow in Lamentations 5. First, this is the only lament in Lamentations that is not in acrostic form. This is intentional, Jeremiah is signifying that he is no longer able to identify and organize the effects of his sorrow. It is chaos. Secondly, no one escapes the effects of this sorrow. In his lament, Jeremiah mentions kinds and servants, children and elders, men and women. There are no exceptions. Finally, throughout the lament Jerusalem takes on the personification of having a body, which all parts of are affected. **Verse 10**, the skin of the city is hot from famine. **Verse 16**, the crown has fallen from her head. **Verse 17**, the heart is sick with sin, and the eyes have grown dim. The whole body is in need of restoration: outward and inward.

What is all this teaching us? I believe we must learn a valuable lesson here about the nature of sorrow and the necessity of lament. In order to deal with the long-term effects of sorrow, we have to see with a wide lens. We have got to get our scope right. You see, we are all on a journey to restoration. None of us are innocent. In Adam, scripture says, we all fall. And in order to take steps towards ultimate restoration, we need help. The gospel says we've got it in the conquering King Jesus-he is our help and our restoration, bringing us back into a kingdom, as Hebrews says, that cannot be shaken by our own instability. But before we can make those steps towards this unshakable kingdom, we have to be honest with ourselves, with one another, and with God.

Lament allows us to zoom out. As we bring our sorrows to God in lament, we begin to see how they are interconnected. They affect our future, our family, our provision, our pedigree, our status, our safety, our dignity, our freedom, our community, our celebration, and our innocence. There are few greater examples in our history than the history of the sorrow of our black brothers and sisters. Even our own Christian and Baptist heritage are rife with examples of how our sin brought about their sorrow. The great evils and sorrow of chattel slavery are long ago passed. Those evils brought pride and violence and even civil war. But the sorrow didn't end at the emancipation proclamation. Neither did they end with the Civil Rights movement, as Dr. King and his allies woke up so many to the realities of systemic racism. The story of Ahmaud Arbury that I shared earlier is just one example. The sorrows of that evil still linger and persist.

This is not to say that no restoration has been made. It's simply to say that we tend to measure our sorrow in months instead of centuries. We forget about it, because it's easier. We bury it, because it's simpler. And when we do that, when we forget to lament not just in the moment of sorrow, but as we deal with the effects of it, what we do is cheapen the covenant faithfulness of God. Why



does Jeremiah asks God to look and see the effects of their sorrow? Why can't he move on? It's been months since the siege? Why can't he just pull himself out of this sad and lonely pit and get forget about it? Because he knows that by lamenting not only the sorrow by the effects of the sorrow, he opens himself up to see the covenant love of God displayed again and again and again.

Let me ask you, Christian, what sorrow are you burying? What effects of the past are you shirking off? What past sin are you discounting? When you see the effects come out, do you call it by name? For myself, I admit my life has been free of much sorrow or injustice from the sin of others. But I have caused some sorrow from my own sin. I used to be heavily addicted to pornography. That is the sorrow of my past, which locked me in my room in shame and guilt and isolation. And here is what I must admit: although in God's great mercy he has spared me from the firsthand sorrow of that sin, I often still feel it's secondary effects. I feel it in the depression or extreme introversion that sometimes comes knocking. I feel it at times when my relationships feel strained and I revert back to the same attitude of selfishness that gripped me in the past. I feel it's effects. I see that scope. And denying it and burying it only buries the opportunity I have to call and cry out to God when that sorrow raises its ugly head again. I am not calling for us to be stuck in the past. I am not saying that we should rehearse our sorrow over and over. I am saying that being honest about how our sorrow has shaped us is the first and vital step towards restoration. Pay close attention to the scope of your sorrow. If you never think you need restoration, you'll never ask for it, and you will never get it.

There is no glory in stoicism or machoism. Jesus says that "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The Scripture commands us to "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you," and "Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." Though the effects of your sorrow run deep, and the scope of your suffering endures, do not forget that God in Christ was also a "man of sorrows" and "acquainted with grief". His understanding and gentle heart possesses far more endurance than your greatest sorrow. As John Owen says, "he can no more cast off poor sinners for their ignorance and wanderings than a nursing mother should cast away a child for it's crying."¹ The effects of sorrow reach every area of our sin-torn life, but that is simply where restoration begins, not ends.

Measure Your Sorrow in Eternity (19-22)

The second step to restoration from sorrow is to measure your sorrow in eternity. Lamentations does not end with a perfectly tied bow of certainty. Rather, it ends with a question, a caveat, a doubt. Jeremiah wonders in **verse 22** "unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us." This kind of ending does not sit well with us. We desire the certainty, the surety, that restoration of our brokenness will come. We are impatient people, too antsy to wait for our popcorn to pop or our videos to load. In fact, when many Jewish people recite or read from the book of Lamentations, they leave this verse out. Instead, they just read verse 21 over

¹ John Owen, *Works*, 21:455



again. BUt we are not afraid to look at this uncertainty in the eye. But Lamentations does not have the last word. It's a picture and guide for reality, but it's only a piece of the puzzle. God measures his acts in eternity, not in years or even lifetimes. Our faith rests in the certainty of his character proven in Jesus Christ.

This is Jeremiah's clarity of perspective in **verse 19**. Though the effects of his sorrow continue, and the reign of Jerusalem has ceased, there is a throne that reigns forever. It may not be the physical Jerusalem, but it isn't Babylon either. I am reminded of a famous poem by Percy Shelley, entitled "Ozymandias". Ozymandias is an ancient king, who thought himself to be immortal. Many attribute this name to Ramses II, pharaoh of Egypt, who may be the Pharaoh described in the book of Exodus. At the height of his power and reign, he was a god among men, king of kings. Enteral in his own eyes. His great statue was built so all could see him and worship, not unlike the colossal statue that future king Nebbeachenezzur of Babylon would erect of himself. But the story Shelley tells of Ozymandias is not glory and worship. He hears a tale of the statue years and years later. All that is left is two legs, and a head halfway buried in the sand. The very statue that used to display glory and awe now only display shame and mockery. The only ingredient needed for that great reversal was time.

"Ozymandias" by Percy Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Friends, you may see the king of the world standing tall now, even years after the sharp pain of sorrow fades. To you, that sorrow, be it intense pattern of sin, the death of a loved one, the fragmentation of a relationship, it seems to rule over you like Ozymandius. But it's effects will not carry on into eternity. One day the sorrow you know so dearly will be completely restored. In eternity with God in Christ, our sorrows are not forgotten, but they are seen rightly. Like the fallen and decayed statue of the Great Ozymandias, we see them for what they really are. Our sorrow has an expiration date, slowly decaying in our hearts as the glory and love of God grows and grows.

When it comes to lamenting rightly, perspective is everything. We live in the "already not yet". Christ, the great conquering king, has come to earth. His birth was the gospel proclamation that



the king has come. His perfect life was the necessary example of true glory and might. His substitutionary death was the sword that fell the great enemy of sin and sorrow and satan. His resurrection was the sure signifier of his triumph. His Spirit is the unbreakable seal of his victorious future. And his return will be the final and eternal restoration of what has always been his.

When we measure our sorrow rightly, we see its effects. But we see them in light of eternity. And so we can echo with Lamentations in verse **21** and cry out to God saying “restore us to yourself, O Lord.” True lament says “bring us back to Eden”. Lament is wrought with sincere longing for that day of final restoration. And even that longing moves us, step by step, closer to the reality of the new Eden. Proper longing is the way to future restoration. And here is good news. When God restores, he doesn’t just make it like it was before. He makes it better. When he restored Job after his trials, he received double what he had. If anyone is in Christ, he is not just a reverted creation, he is a *new* creation. Christ didn’t bleed and die so that you could have life again, he did it so that you could have new life forever. If you are stuck in your sorrow, don’t bury it. Get the right lens. Put on the glasses of eternity; play the long game. Have faith. God has set his eyes to love you from eternity. His heart is not predisposed towards anger and destruction, it is predisposed towards mercy and love. He is rich in mercy, and if you have turned from sin and put your trust in Christ, you cannot oversell the restoration that is headed your way. When you meet him on the last day, the restoration you will receive will cause you to “weep with relief, shocked at how impoverished a view of his mercy-rich heart you had”.²

Church, in Lamentations we have learned to ask, to see, to cry, and to hope. And we’ve learned not only to do this for ourselves, but for others. If we can lament well, we fulfill our mission. What right and Biblical lament does for us as a people is makes us an eternally-minded people. We begin to have joy even in sorrow, we begin to see the slow and purposeful passing of the days as God’s good gift. Why? Because we’ve brought our sorrow to an eternal God, and we’ve measured it in eternity as he is. We see dimly, one day we will see face to face. We yearn for things unseen, because they are eternal. A church like that preaches the good news of the gospel with clarity and prophetic conviction. A church like that bears with one another, suffers together, is comforted together. A church like that laments together and acts justly together. A church like that waits, with patient hope, for the revealing of all things. A church like that measures life in eternity. A church like that makes Jesus known. Let’s strive to be that church, resting in the arms of Jesus our sorrow taker and burden bearer.

² Dane Ortlund, *Lowly and Gentle*, 180.

