



GRACE CHURCH

Wandering From True Worship

Lamentations 4

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During our study of Lamentations, I must confess that one of my biggest laments is that I don't really know "how" to lament. I don't know if I've ever faced the depth of pain and suffering of lament especially with what I see in the life of Jeremiah. Yet, because I'm in Christ by faith, I know the pain and godly sorrow that I feel as a result of my sin. By the conviction of the Spirit, I desire to repent from sin, knowing that God has forgiven me because of the gospel. I also know what I believe and who I worship... but it's the deep emotional prayer lament that I'm unfamiliar with. Maybe for you as well. I have much to learn about the art of biblical lament but I fully trust our Heavenly Father to teach me in his mercy, with his loving discipline and with hope in his infinite love.

I am making some progress on the lament learning curve as a result of our Lamentations study. I'm been learning that lament is an intense emotional prayer, an honest cry of a heart that wrestles with the paradox of the pain of sin and the promise of God's goodness. I'm learning how lament can be a personal sorrow, past or present, or a sorrow of the injustice in the world. The formula we've been taught over the past few sermons has been such a big help to guide us to: ask hard questions of God and the world; see the world and God rightly; cry out to God in repentance and need; and find hope in God's character and unchanging love and then pray that truth back to him.

As I learn to lament, I'd also like to thank to one of our Grace Church members and a Baylor student, Madi Snow, who encouraged me by sharing her lament testimony. Madi has endured four long years of a personal and painful journey with the unwelcome presence of suffering from a connective tissue disease. Let me share with you a portion of what Madi wrote for the blog called UnBlemished. She entitled it, *Finding Abundant Life in Unwelcome Newness*. You can read it, in its entirety, on her Facebook page. Madi says this,

"For the last four years, I've been in pain.... I woke up, and suddenly I knew I was dust. I knew my bones were fragile and so was my heart... I have spent a lot of time alone in pain. This last month... we all woke up to find our ability-ability to work and play and be with the people we love-limited. We are, for the first time in many of our lives, experiencing a communal grief. Maybe also you're feeling vulnerability exposed.... Madi continues... There is a private suffering in the life of each Christian, known only by them and the Father... In my desert times of solitude, I have felt most intimately near to God. I pray the



same would be true for you. You do not need to emerge from quarantine as from a self-betterment retreat. You do not need to have created spectacular art or discerned the voice of God in your time alone. But I do hope you find rich comfort here that you might remember long after this season ends. I promise, there is abundant life to be found in this unwelcome newness. The Emmanuel God is near your suffering and closer than your breathing.”

Thank you Madi for sharing your personal journey of suffering and pointing us to hope in God. In Jesus we do have abundant life and abounding grace to face any unwelcome newness we may go through. We know this to be true because Jesus gave us his promise in John 10, that in him, we have eternal life and we have it “abundantly.”

Each one of us needs this hope for today and in the days ahead. We cannot live in this trouble-filled world without a hope-filled expectation to move forward in faith. We have to believe there is a brighter day coming. Otherwise, we’d become so discouraged that we might give up--and sadly, that is where many people are today. But it doesn’t have to be that way. As God’s beloved children, we can live with hope in the Father’s love, knowing he is with us and will never forsake us.

And as we learned last Sunday in Lamentations Ch. 3, Emmanuel God was with Jeremiah as he wrestled with the paradox of the pain of sin and the promise of God’s goodness. With deep lament for God to deliver him and the people of Judah, Jeremiah cried out to God, *You came near when I called on you; you said, ‘Do not fear!’ “You have taken up my cause, O Lord; you have redeemed my life.”* Here is a hint of the light of the gospel in the dark pages of Lamentations. The only way God would plead the case of his people was if he himself paid for – or redeemed them – from their sinfulness.

When the Lord said, “Do not fear!”, to Jeremiah, it’s the first and only time in Lamentations that God speaks to him and gives evidence of hearing and answering his prayers of lament. The Lord had listened to Jeremiah, drawn near to him, comforted him, and redeemed him. And Jesus gave the same hope of redemption to his disciples when he said in Luke 12:32 *“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”* And friends, we have the same promise of eternal hope.

As Pastor Drake explained last Sunday, Chapter 3 is the heart of Lamentations. Chapter 3 gives the book a hope-filled framework around which the other chapters revolve. The black velvet of sin and suffering in chapters 1 and 2 and in chapters 4 and 5 serves as a backdrop to showcase the steadfastness of God’s merciful and loyal love. In Ch. 3 we learned that Jeremiah was able to place his and Judah’s sin and affliction in proper perspective by remembering how it relates to God’s character and his covenant faithfulness. To be sure, the suffering of the people of Judah was self-inflicted as a result of their idolatry. Yet, the afflictions and discipline came from a compassionate God who is faithful to his covenant people. So, Jeremiah exhorted the people, *“let us examine our ways, let us return to the Lord.”* God used affliction as a corrective measure to restore his people to repentance.



Jeremiah was a living example to the people of Judah to show them how hope springs forth in remembrance of affliction, lament of sin, and calling to mind that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is his faithfulness. Jeremiah's hope is a biblical hope, emboldened in confident assurance in the present about what God will do in the future, based on the character of God's covenant love.

Keep in mind, God is the central figure in Lamentations, not Jeremiah, or the people of Jerusalem. And here in chapter 4, God's covenant faithfulness is showcased despite Judah's unfaithfulness. Jeremiah again returns to survey the scene of calamity in Jerusalem that we saw in Ch. 2 but there is hope ahead in God's mercy and love. The sermon outline we will follow consists of three sections: Conditions in Jerusalem during the siege. Causes for the siege. Call of hope for Jerusalem because of God's mercy and covenantal love. Here at the beginning of Ch. 4, there is desperation over Jerusalem. The people are consumed with fear and suffering as the siege by Babylon's armies brought destruction to the city, death to many of its citizens and despair to its survivors. Idolatry flourished as the people cried out to any and every false god for deliverance. Their only hope was to call on God in humble repentance and seek his mercy.

As we look at the conditions and causes of Jerusalem's down-fall we will also consider in the application section how idols can capture our hearts and why we must guard ourselves from worldly affections and enticements. Just like idolatry in the Old Testament, here in the U.S., there continues a similar and staggering, evil, moral slide committed against God.

A. Conditions during the siege (4:1-11)

1. The first description of siege conditions, in verses 1-6, is also the first stanza of Jeremiah's fourth poem of lament.

Lamentations is a reminder that sin, in spite of its fleshly excitement, carries with it, heavy weights of misery. It's the other side of the 'eat, drink and be merry' coin. And because of Judah's idolatry, they felt the sorrow of the "other side of the coin." Verse 1 begins by lamenting the loss of beauty of Jerusalem's wealth. The coins and treasures had become dull and cast-off gems. The gold adornment of the temple, looted by its conquerors, lost its luster and was scattered in the streets. And in verse 2, the citizens of Jerusalem, compared to precious gold, now lay in the streets of the city, defiled and dying, worth nothing more than broken clay pots.

In verses 3-4, we see that the horrors of the siege had turned the once compassionate women of Judah into abusive mothers unwilling to give of themselves for the welfare of their children. The children were suffering because of the sins of their parents. In verse 5, the rich people who were accustomed to eating delicacies were now destitute in the streets. Those who once adorned themselves in royal purple were now lying in ash heaps.

Jeremiah ended this first stanza of his lament poem in verse 6, by stating that Jerusalem's sin and punishment were both greater than Sodom's because God overthrew Sodom quickly, whereas the siege of Jerusalem lasted almost two years.



2. The second description of siege conditions is in verses 7-11.

In verses 7-9, the city's spiritual leaders, called princes, had dedicated themselves to the Lord and were the most devout people of Jerusalem. However, even they had become victims of the siege, and had suffered along with the others. And just when it seemed things couldn't get worse, the horrific murder of children by their mothers took place. In verse 10, women boiled their own children and ate them to sustain their lives.

It's hard to imagine a more sickening image to serve as a climax to the famine and destruction. We think how terrible this was that mothers killed their children but our society today is no different. Mothers are having abortions and murdering their babies. I'll have more to say on this when we get to the application section.

In verse 11, Jeremiah concluded this second stanza by again pointing to the Lord as the source of Judah's judgment. God had executed his wrath by punishing Jerusalem. Like an inferno, his righteous anger burned among his people and consumed the city with fire. Even though the Babylonians were the instrumental cause of the destruction, the Lord was the efficient cause of it. This righteous punishment was all the Lord's doing. Jerusalem was suffering at the hands of God's justice.

B. Causes of the siege in verses 12-20.

Jeremiah now turned from the suffering to its source. Here in verses 12-20, let's look at three causes for the siege and fall of Jerusalem. The first cause of Jerusalem's downfall is seen in verse 13 *This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her, the blood of the righteous*. The priests and the prophets had become corrupt, they perverted temple worship and had forsaken the Lord's covenant. The book of Jeremiah gives the account of how they committed adultery, shed the blood of the innocent and misled King Zedekiah and the people. And in verses 14-16, these spiritually blind leaders had lost their eyesight during the siege and wandered blindly in the streets. God had scattered these leaders because they had led the people into sin and idolatry.

The second cause of Jerusalem's siege is seen in verse 17. King Zedekiah had rejected God's pronouncement of judgment and exile on Jerusalem and looked for help from foreign alliances to save them. Verse 17, *Our eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help; in our watching we watched for a nation which could not save*. Their expectation that another nation might come to their aid, such as Egypt, proved to be in vain (cf. Jer. 34:21; 37:7). The circumstances that led Judah to look to Egypt for help are recorded in Jer. Ch. 21 where the king directed Jeremiah to intercede to the Lord. God's answer was that he would hand Judah over to judgment, first by plague, and secondly, those who escaped would fall to the Babylonians. The only hope that any of the people would have was to surrender. Whoever stayed in the city would die. But for those who surrendered they would escape with their lives. Zedekiah heard God's answer, but rejected it, listened to the false prophets who contradicted Jeremiah, and looked to Egypt for rescue rather than the Lord.



The third cause of Jerusalem's overthrow is signaled by the capture of the king. Verse 20, *The breath of our nostrils, the Lord's anointed, was captured in their pits, of whom we said, "Under his shadow we shall live among the nations."* Zedekiah was God's anointed and the very breath of life to Judah. But God removed the king because of his idolatrous sins and rejection of God's word through the prophet Jeremiah. Judah had hoped to live under the king's authority while in captivity, however, the enemy captured him, sentenced him, murdered his sons and imprisoned him. Zedekiah's epitaph is that "he did evil in the sight of the Lord" by not removing all of the idols from the land (Jer 52). As a result, the king lost his freedom, his throne, and his people to exile. Through it all, God was faithful to do what he had promised. He carried out the righteous judgment he had declared. God's purpose in judging his people was to awaken their souls, lead them to repentance and renew their hope.

C. Call of Hope following the siege in verses 21-22.

The tragic tone of chapter 4 has been to focus on the absolute hopeless situation in Jerusalem, and by verse 20 it's clear that the end has come. But suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, comes a surprising prophetic oracle proclaiming divine judgment on Edom for its evil treatment of Judah and an end to Judah's exile. In verse 21, the Edomites, Judah's Gentile enemy, rejoiced over Jerusalem's destruction. But the same fate was sure to overtake them for they would also have to drink the cup of God's judgment. Judah's punishment had reached its completion; the exile would not last forever. Verse 22, *The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer.*

So, Jeremiah offered hope to the people in the midst of despair, but this is only an interlude, a point of calm in the center of the storm. The fifth poem in chapter 5 will find Judah once again lamenting in suffering, with questions and doubts, but eventually (spoiler alert) turn to the Lord in repentance and find renewed hope for their future.

As we've studied Lamentations, we've seen the suffering caused by sin. God's wrath on Judah is a reminder to the futility of trusting in anything but God. Jeremiah's lament over the moral decay in Israel helps us to see our world today, the church, and ourselves, through a similar lens. Sanctity of life should motivate us to combat all forms of evil and injustice. Abortion, abuse, racism, human trafficking, and many other evils are all violations of the sanctity of life.

The deeper we delve into Lamentations, hopefully, we will lament the moral decline of our day. We must lament the conviction of passivity of being a bystander in the fight against evil. We must lament the uncovering of hidden idols in our own hearts. Friends lament is the language that calls us to unwrap our hearts from idols and return to the Lord in true worship.

Lamentations serves as a textbook of important lessons for the church amidst our current culture. Just like the idolatry of God's people in the Old Testament, here in our American culture, there continues a similar moral slide against God.



Some of the lessons I'll share come from the book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy—Discovering the Grace of Lament*, written by Pastor Mark Vroegop. So, let's discover from Lamentations 4... five lessons of how hearts wander from true worship of the Creator to trusting in the creation... and how we can guard ourselves from worldly affections and entrapments.

First: the people worshipped the beauty of things instead of the beauty of God.

The people of Judah rejected worshiping God and obeying his Law and put their affections in the pride of their capitol city. The temple became a false assurance of God's protective power. The wealth of ornate architecture, jewels and precious metals made a status symbol of pride. And God condemned it to ruin.

For us, we may not have the allure of a beautiful temple. But as we know, the accumulation of money and possessions can become objects of prideful status, and it can become an idol. An idol is whatever we look at and say in our heart, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, I'll know I have value, I'll feel significant and secure.' That's why a recession, the loss of a job, the failure of a business, or a city with shelter-in-place restrictions, is an opportunity to reflect on any misplaced trust in our wealth. When things like this take place, lamenting the loss can awaken our soul to the foolishness of trusting in financial security. Hardship of financial loss can reveal sinful fixation with the security that money provides.

If we're not watchful, money can subtly become an idol beneath the surface of our lives. For some it could be a motivation for choosing a career that provides generous salary and benefits or fits the culture's image of success. For others, it could be the pursuit of a lavish and extravagant lifestyle. Regardless of the expression, it's easy for money to become an object of trust. Lament reveals our self-sufficiency and shows us the spiritual bankruptcy of trusting in financial security. But wealth is not the issue. Worship is. Do we worship money and the worldly lifestyle it provides? Do we place our trust and comfort and peace there? Or do we worship God and the kingdom lifestyle he provides?

Jesus tells us in Luke 12: 32 *Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* 33 *Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys.* 34 *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

The Second Lesson: the people rejected God's word.

In Jeremiah's day, the king, the priests and prophets, and the people, had neglected the promise of covenant blessing for obedience, and ignored the promise of punishment for disobedience. Most of the people had stopped reading and studying the Mosaic Law, and this opened the door to consequent disobedience and punishment. Does this remind us of our nation?



So, what does rejection of God and his word in the church look like today? It looks like a lack of worship and reverence in obeying God's word, lack of selfless love, lack of discipleship, lack of covenant membership, lack of church discipline, lack of influence in the culture, independence and spiritual blindness—all are telltale signs. Things go from bad to worse when pastors try to cater to the desires of a self-centered culture. In doing so they deceive their flocks with false words of easy acceptance by a so-called tolerant and distant God, while condoning heresy, immorality, and gospel-empty religiosity.

Third, the people transferred their trust in God to idolatrous objects of hope, namely their religious leaders.

Rather than turning to the Lord for provision and protection, Judah chose to rely on what they could see, and what appeared to be strong. They Idolized spiritual leaders like saviors. But they were blind to how the leader's spiritual and moral authority had vanished and how they had been led astray. Jeremiah 6:13-14 *For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.14 They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace.*

The book of Jeremiah and Lamentations shows how far spiritual leaders can fall and why Judah lost its way. The lament of chapter 4 shows us the connection between a vacuum of spiritual leadership and divine discipline. This lesson of lament due to leadership failure must sound the alarm that it's time for the church to take a close look in the mirror. Church leaders cannot preach 'peace, peace,' when there is no peace' and while the culture is sliding into moral chaos. Pastors should walk alongside their people and model self-examination and repentance and lead the way to live out God's word. Listen again to Jeremiah's humble lament, *"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."*3:40-41

Spiritual authority can equip the church body if we are careful not to idolize those in spiritual leadership. As your pastors, we seek your prayers that we will be accountable to our members and not preach empty assurance that all is well with how the church does business, when the vulnerable and marginalized are ignored and the gospel is being withheld because of the fervor of busy-ness or fear of man.

The Fourth Lesson: the people presumed divine favor.

The lesson of how hearts wander from true worship relates to the assumption of the blessing of God. No nation would have greater reason to claim a most favored status than Judah. They were God's chosen people. But divine favor does not give people permission to proudly ignore God's law and warnings of judgment.

Doesn't this sound like the current United States of American Pride? Not too long ago we felt a good kind of pride as a predominantly Christian and Bible believing nation, but now many Americans chase after false gods than the one true God. They love the world and the things of the



world. The love of God is not in them, only the desires of the flesh, and the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life.

God shows favor not to nations or churches but to those who delight in, abide in, and give honor to him. Isaiah 66:2 says,

“These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.” God’s favor is closely related to his grace in the Scriptures. Those who receive Jesus as their Savior are saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8–9). They know the favor of God. And the most basic answer to “how may I receive God’s favor” is to “believe in the Lord Jesus.”

Lamentations reminds us that divine blessing does not guarantee a life without pain and lament helps us to search our hearts for the ways that pride has invaded our lives.

The Fifth Lesson: the people abandoned the care of the weak and defenseless.

The desperation over Jerusalem changed the way people treated one another. They worshiped God in the temple but all the while they allowed the weak, the poor, the children, and the widow to suffer in their midst. Compassion was gone. The mothers overcome by despair cannibalized their own children. Jeremiah lamented the loss as a warning of how broken society can become. These moral and social evils are really hard for us to think about. Not only the evil that happened to Judah, but also to face the reality of evil, that is happening now.

Grace Church, we must learn to lament in repentance... to help us face the evil of our day. We need to ask ourselves if we are ignoring the cruelty around us. A peace and safety mentality can create a heartless disregard for the problems in our city. It can be easy to insulate ourselves by retreating into the safety of our church walls, while less than 5 miles away is one of the largest abortion clinics in Texas, where unborn children are murdered every week. This past March, Waco was one of over 300 cities in 25 countries participating in the 40 Days for Life Campaign. This ministry prayed for the closing of Planned Parenthood in Waco. Every day from 7 am to 7 pm, except Sunday, people walked around the perimeter of the abortion facility and prayed for the lives of babies in the womb and for their mothers. Each day that I joined in the prayer walks, I learned more about lament through the sorrow of injustice and wickedness against the unborn. I also learned to lament with those I prayed with. Several of the women I met expressed deep personal lament about killing their own babies but they also shared the miraculous healing they received of God’s grace, mercy and forgiveness in Jesus.

So, let us lament the millions of children who were never born. Let us lament the moment when a mother decides that her body is more valuable than a baby’s body. Let us lament the pain of regret that some have to battle every day. Let us lament a culture for which this issue has become far too common and much too tolerable. These atrocities must move “us” to lament. Be moved to pray.



Be moved to act. Prayers of lament can give us new eyes to see the true conditions of our society and open our hearts to enter into the pain.

What other cultural issues do we tend to ignore? We must lament before God about the suffering of poverty, divorce, racism, drug addiction, sex trafficking, and other social ills. Allow lament to soften our hearts to the problems around us and not ignore the cries of our culture.

Friends, the fact is, we live in a culture that is hell-bent on redefining morality. Not only is there a growing movement to do this, but in some cases, attempts are made to punish people who refuse to endorse this un-godly, new morality. The church is facing a choice: go the way of the culture... or stand firm for God's truth.

Yet, because we have grown so accustomed to cultural comfort, we find it hard to stand firm in the face of pressure to ignore God's word. For generations our culture has been chiseling away at the foundation of biblical morality and marriage. The moral revolution of homosexuality and the transgender movement are also a wicked part of the sinful shift of society. It is the world we live in. The question we must ask is how do we faithfully minister the gospel to our culture? That has always been the question. But there is a larger issue than the sexual and moral sin we see rampant today. That is just a symptom. The real issue is the relationship between God's revealed truth, sinful man's rejection of it, and the church's unwillingness to stand firm on it. We must pray as a church and as individuals for the courage and wisdom to speak the truth, and for the grace to do it with love and compassion.

In summary, from the nation Israel in the book of Lamentations to our current day, idolatry of every kind, including national pride, has shaped our society. We must not be seduced by false teachings of God and of Christ. Don't let our heart be captured by the idol of self and the trivialities of our culture. Reject the false promises of empty riches. Reject the evil of sexual immorality. Reject the vain boasts of self-promotion and the craving for fame. Choose to abide in Jesus. Remain in his steadfast love. Remember, self-sufficiency results in afflictions. God-sufficiency renews our affections. Hardship reveals our idols. Hope restores worship when hope springs forth in remembrance of affliction, lament of sin, and calling to mind that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.

As we walk through times of loss, like we are in this current crisis, let's not miss the life-changing lessons that are a part of the process. Pain is an uncomfortable but helpful teacher. Instead of running to anger or fear, draw near to God in sincere lament and repentance. Talk to God about what we're learning. Look to him for endurance. Take action as we address the entanglement of our hearts with our culture.

To be sure, we have not arrived. But in the process of wrestling with our idols we are rediscovering the grace of lament. This ancient expression that gives voice to our pain, becomes our teacher and leads us to trust God that he is using our trials to refine our faith and help us conquer our sin struggles.



Keep in mind, our primary goal as the church is not to stop the moral slide of the idolatry of society. Our goal must be to see lives transformed by the gospel of Jesus, including our own. And the hope of the gospel gains urgency in the light of God's verdict of judgment on sinful humanity. Our hope is in a righteous and just God who strengthens us by his Spirit so we may endure suffering, repent from idolatry and walk in godliness.

The gospel is the antidote. Through trust in Jesus comes "the obedience of faith" that results in the joy of knowing and being known by God. In every situation where it appears that evil will triumph, we find the love of Jesus shining with gospel deeds that are heroic and sacrificial, acts of forgiveness, kindness, goodness and faith. It's clear that evil infiltrates our political, economic and religious landscape because many are greedy for unjust gain and speak falsehood. Evil flourishes in the world, like weeds. But God protects the wheat of his kingdom harvest. To that end, God's word calls us to faithfully and graciously shine the light of the gospel to non-Christians and also to encourage fellow believers who are striving for holiness by looking to the gospel as our continual hope.

One day the harvest will come but until that day may we preach the good news of hope in Jesus. May we commit to maintain God's holy standards and communicate God's truth to sinners, while remembering that we are sinners too. Today's idolatrous culture calls for us to be bold, but kind, as we seek relational connection and an invitation to talk about the hope of the gospel. We have to believe there is a brighter day coming. We cannot live in this trouble-filled world without hope-filled confidence in the steadfast love of the Lord. Great is his faithfulness.

