

Learning to Lament

Lamentations 1

Introduction

Grief or (and?) Joy: There's a popular cliché: "laugh so you don't cry."¹ It is very easy (and very tempting) to think we should spend our lives running from sadness. "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief" (Prov 14:13). Did you know that stand-up comedians actually experience a significantly higher rate of depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges compared to the general population? (e.g., Robin Williams).²

- Have you ever seen the Disney-Pixar movie *Inside Out*? Bing Bong is the best! It may have done more to explain our emotions than anything since Mr. Rogers. It puts a creative spin on the emotional life of Riley, a young girl navigating a major life transition after moving to a new city. It follows personified versions of her emotions: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust.
- Most of the time, "Joy" is trying to keep the other emotions, especially "Sadness," from sabotaging Riley's happiness. She's constantly pushing Sadness aside, trying to manage everything so nothing feels heavy.
- But one of the key lessons is that Sadness isn't the enemy. In fact, Sadness is what allows Riley to process her loss, connect with others, and ultimately experience deeper, more meaningful joy.
 - I'm not trying to ignore the benefit of humor in times of grief (e.g., gallows humor) or turn us all emo, but I do think we need to face the reality of our disappointment, grief, brokenness, and sadness. When we're honest about those things, they actually teach us about our world, ourselves, and our God.
- Eventually, life hits you with something you can't joke your way out of.

Strange Book: We come to this "strange" book. It's not praise, or instruction, but "**lament**" (Dictionary: "to express deep sorrow, grief, or regret").

- Since the Middle Ages, Jewish Communities have read it to commemorate the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC and the second by the Romans 70 AD,³ and in modern times to remember the tragedy of the Holocaust.
- Traditionally attributed to the prophet Jeremiah ("the lamentations of Jeremiah the prophet"),⁴ in five chapters, it artfully portrays the sorrow of God's people.
 - Chapter 1 (outside view).
 - Chapter 2 (inside view).
 - Chapter 3 (upward view). *Climactic moment*.
 - Chapter 4 (overall view).

¹ "We'll rent a comedy, rewind the best parts, and memorize the lines. I'll call everyone, and they can come over if it keeps things off your mind. Well, I'll try my best to be funny so you forget for a while. You should laugh so you don't cry" (Andy Davis, "Laugh So You Don't Cry").

² University of Oxford (2014), University of Westminster, ScienceDirect.com, <https://fherehab.com/learning/comedians-depressed-mental-illness>

³ 9th of Av

⁴ Cf. MT, LXX, Jerome, etc. The undisputed claim of Jewish and Christian tradition though *formally* anonymous.

- Chapter 5 (future view). *Prayer*.
- The first four chapters are actually acrostic poems in the original Hebrew.⁵ Many have described the meter of the original Hebrew as “limping”⁶ and mimicking a funeral dirge.⁷

Recovering Lament: I think we would do well to recover both a **theology** and a **practice** of lament. “Lamentations is a book for today. In a world where the tide of human suffering threatens to overwhelm whatever [barriers] we put in place to contain it,” this book gives voice to our questions and our pain (Wright) and teaches us an important lesson: suffering⁸ should drive us to cry out to God.⁹

1. Be Honest About the Devastation of Sin (vv. 1-11a)

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. ³ Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude; she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. ⁴ The roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival; all her gates are desolate; her priests groan; her virgins have been afflicted, and she herself suffers bitterly. ⁵ Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper, because the LORD has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe. ⁶ From the daughter of Zion all her majesty has departed. Her princes have become like deer that find no pasture; they fled without strength before the pursuer. ⁷ Jerusalem remembers in the days of her affliction and wandering all the precious things that were hers from days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was none to help her, her foes gloated over her; they mocked at her downfall. ⁸ Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans and turns her face away. ⁹ Her uncleanness was in her skirts; she took no thought of her future; therefore her fall is terrible; she has no comforter. “O LORD, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed!” ¹⁰ The enemy has stretched out his hands over all her precious things; for she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation. ¹¹ All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength.

Narrative Context: The chapter is broken into two halves based on the speaker. The first half is a third-person account of Jerusalem, the holy city, after it has been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire.

⁵ Chapter 5 isn't an acrostic but still has 22 lines (i.e., 22 letters in Hebrew alphabet).

⁶ 3:2

⁷ *Qinah*

⁸ *of sin*

⁹ God's judgment drives us to cry out to him.

- In 586 BC, the armies of Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar II, besieged Jerusalem, breached its walls, burned the city, defeated the army, and destroyed the temple built by Solomon (cf. 2 Kgs 25).
- Tens of thousands of people were exiled to Babylon. That's how the setting for books like Daniel and Esther.
 - We know the king was captured, along with other nobles, officials, priests, craftsmen, and educated or influential people.

Personification: The city is personified as a lonely widow, whose former royal glory has been destroyed. Allies have become enemies. Her streets are empty. Rather than a beautiful treasure of God, she has been defiled by the nations.¹⁰

- Things are *not* the way they are supposed to be (e.g., like a cone with no ice cream).
 - The festivals that should fill the streets of Zion are empty.
 - The enemies of God and his people are prospering.
 - Rather than a holy people enjoying the blessings of God, Israel has shown herself to be a sinful people experiencing the discipline of God.
 - BTW, the consequences of sin are real, and God uses those consequences to lovingly discipline us, but they don't justify the evil behavior of his enemies.
- Just look at the words, phrases, and ideas repeated throughout this chapter:
 - No one to comfort or help her (vv. 2, 7, 9, 17, 16, 21).
 - Constant groaning (vv. 4, 8, 11, 21, 22).

Picture of Destruction: It doesn't take much imagination to see that the plight of God's city is the plight of God's people.

- There are religions and philosophies that would tell us suffering is an illusion.
 - Have you ever heard of **Christian Science**?¹¹ You might see their "reading rooms" on various main streets across the country (one was near the campus of my university). Spoiler alert, Christian Science is like Grape Nuts (neither grapes, nor nuts; neither Christian, nor science). It teaches that sickness, pain, and even death are illusions of the mind.
 - Even more mainstream religions like **Buddhism** teach that suffering (which is real) is rooted in attachment, so the solution is not to grieve deeply, but to detach from what causes suffering.
 - I've even seen a resurgence of the ancient philosophy of stoicism (co-opted by modern self-help gurus and manosphere influencers). They teach emotional control (*not bad*) through rational detachment (*problematic*). So they don't *deny* pain, they just act like they're not affected by it.

¹⁰ Lurid imagery of 8-9 (metaphor of sexual abuse) is continued with language of v. 10. The enemy is pawing her. Pagans are going into her holy place. "Entering" is often the language of intercourse. "The image is of [Jerusalem] being raped; indeed the plural 'nations' may suggest that she is being gang-raped" (Parry).

¹¹ Christian Science is a nominally Christian denomination (clearly heretical as evidenced in non-trinitarian beliefs, denial of divinity of Jesus, rejection of substitutionary death of Jesus, etc.). Founded in 1879 by Mary Baker Eddy. It teaches that reality is purely spiritual and that the material world, including sickness, sin, and death, is an illusion. It maintains a global presence through its reading rooms and the Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper, *The Christian Science Monitor*.

- There are even “Christian” preachers who would say that suffering is antithetical to a faith-filled life. I still don’t know what they do with a suffering Savior, or the martyrs of the church.
 - I think they have baptized our American addiction to wealth, comfort, and success with pseudo-Christian words.
 - In all honesty, a greater barrier to God than pain is comfort because comfort blinds us to our real need.
- Maybe you don’t have these beliefs *formally*, but you do *practically*.
 - Rather than acknowledge the brokenness of your life or our world, rather than feel the pain of sin, rather than grieve... You distract, self-medicate, joke, scroll, etc.

Grief and Love: The only way to avoid grief is to avoid love because grief is the cost of loving something that can be lost. Paul says, if he doesn’t have, he has nothing.¹² The greatest example of love is Jesus himself, and because of that love, he wept when his friend died.¹³

Tears are a sign of love.¹⁴ Grief is love; that’s why we can say “good grief.”

- Love creates vulnerability. In the Marvel television show *Wandavision*, the superhero Vision says, “What is grief if not love persevering?”
- Tennyson said it this way, “’Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

Total: Actually, the most repeated word in chapter 1 is “all.” The problem of destruction, sin, and brokenness is total. Nothing is untouched by sin.

- That’s actually what we mean by **total depravity**. It’s not that we are as bad as we could be, or the world is as bad as it could be, but that sin has invaded every aspect of existence (e.g., a drop of poison in a glass of water).

Honesty: “Grief over death and all its many faces is the only honest, truthful response to a world that was not made to be this way. Grief tells the truth about the goodness of what God has given us. It’s how we agree with Jesus about the offensiveness of death’s challenge to everything that is good and right and beautiful. Grief is not unbelief in what God will do. It isn’t ingratitude for what God has done. Grief is simply honest, even Christlike” (McCullough).

- There is no path to healing without honesty. There is no path to restoration without acknowledging what is broken. There is no repentance without admitting sin.
- There is no real relationship with God if we refuse to tell the truth about our lives and our world.
 - The world is *not* as it should be.
 - Our lives are *not* as they should be.
 - We are *not* as we should be.
- We have to face the devastation of sin (out there *and* in here).

¹² 1 Cor 13:3

¹³ Jn 11:35

¹⁴ Lk 19:41-44. The Good Friday Anglican liturgy puts Lam 1:12 in the mouth of Jesus.

- But honesty is not enough. **You can be *honest* about your pain and still stuck in it.** You can acknowledge your sin and still be crushed by it.
- The question is not just, “Will you face it?” but, “Where will you take it?” **We should take our pain to God!**

2. Cry Out to God (vv. 11b-22)

“Look, O LORD, and see, for I am despised.” ¹² “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the LORD inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. ¹³ “From on high he sent fire; into my bones he made it descend; he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back; he has left me stunned, faint all the day long. ¹⁴ “My transgressions were bound into a yoke; by his hand they were fastened together; they were set upon my neck; he caused my strength to fail; the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand. ¹⁵ “The Lord rejected all my mighty men in my midst; he summoned an assembly against me to crush my young men; the Lord has trodden as in a winepress the virgin daughter of Judah. ¹⁶ “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed.” 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. ¹⁹ “I called to my lovers, but they deceived me; my priests and elders perished in the city, while they sought food to revive their strength. ²⁰ “Look, O LORD, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. In the street the sword bereaves; in the house it is like death. ²¹ “They heard my groaning, yet there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that you have done it. You have brought the day you announced; now let them be as I am. ²² “Let all their evildoing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions; for my groans are many, and my heart is faint.”

She Speaks: The poem switches from a narrator talking about the city to the city speaking to God (e.g., she/her to I/me/my).

- From *observation* to *participation*. We must be careful not to spend all our time talking *about* God, so we forget to talk *to* God. “O LORD, behold” (v. 9), “Look, O LORD” (v. 11, 20).
 - This isn’t the totality of prayer, but a specific type of prayer.
 - “A lament is the heartfelt cry of sorrow, a prayer through which a believer pours his or her heart out to God because of the struggles and pain of life. In lament, a believer asks God, “Why? How? Who are you?” It’s a God-given expression of our pain, wherein we look to Him for answers, relief, and hope” (Vroegop)
 - Lamentations gives us “a shape for living life before God faithfully in pain and prayer” (Thomas).
 - Lament becomes a vehicle of encounter with God, a vehicle to deal with the pain of the world, the reality of death, and the consequences of sin

- Lament isn't what happens when faith fails; it's what happens when finite people trust God in a broken world.
- Lament is an act of trust, not unbelief. To lament is to take your pain *to* God rather than away from Him.
 - Lament doesn't do the unhelpful either/or:
 - *Either* God is good, *or* deny suffering.
 - *Either* suffering is real, *or* God is not good.
 - Lament holds them together.
 - "Orthodoxy often involves holding several truths in tension. Heresy relieves the tension" (Svigel). There's a ditch on *both* sides of the road.
- Talk to God in times of crisis. When you are hurting, when you feel defeated, when you are overwhelmed, where do you go? Do you go to God?

Unpolished Prayer: These are not the polished prayers of a pious priest, but the honest doubts of a hurting questions of a hurting person.

- It would *probably not* be good to pray like this *all* or *most* of the time. But it would be devastating to never bring your raw questions to God.
 - For I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me (v. 20).
- Some of these prayers come off as accusatory of God (e.g., Why would you? How could you?).
 - You are not going to surprise God with your prayers.
 - You are not going to hurt his feelings.
- Even though the author clearly knows the truth of God's righteous actions: "The LORD is in the right (v. 18).
 - It seems that the author of Lamentations is only able to remember the righteousness, mercy, and hope of God after he honestly wrestles with his grief.
 - You don't bypass grief to get clarity; you go *through* it, and only on the other side do things come into focus.
 - Think of a jar of muddy water. When it's shaken up, everything is cloudy. You can't see through it. But if you let it sit, the dirt settles, and the water clears. That's what lament does. It doesn't immediately fix your situation, but it allows your soul to sit and settle so you can see God clearly again.

Silence of God: Interestingly, God never speaks in the book of Lamentations. We only hear of the promises of God through the memory of the author.

- What happens when we're desperate for the comfort that Jesus promises, and he appears to be silent?
- Song: *Silence of God* "It's enough to drive a man crazy / Or break a man's faith / It's enough to make him wonder / If he's ever been sane / When he's bleeding for comfort / From thy staff and thy rod / And the heavens' only answer / Is the silence of God" (Andrew Peterson)
- There are moments when God appears silent.
 - (1) His silence does not invalidate his previous promises.

- This same lamenter will say: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him” (Lam 3:22-24)
- (2) His silence does not equal absence.
- (3) His silence does not take away from his compassion
- (4) His silence tests our resolve in the truth of his Word.
 - When God seems to hide his grace high and deep, you don’t *have* to leave. You can stick to the Word you know is true. You can trust that his kindness still hides beneath the surface.¹⁵
 - His apparent silence does not need to dissuade your trust. Silence doesn’t have to stop you. The real test of faith is not your joy and perseverance in the midst of comfort and blessing but your persistence in the face of discouragement.
 - Lamentations isn’t the only book in the Bible. The answer to your questions might be found elsewhere in the treasure of God’s Word. There is an answer, it is real, and it is coming.

I want to set the stage for how we learn the lessons of lament during our time in this book.

3. Learn the Lessons of Lament

(1) Don’t avoid grief: face it

- We should not “grieve as those who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13), but we *do* grieve.
- Don’t ignore the brokenness of the world and the pain in your heart.
- If you try to numb the pain instead of dealing with it, you will miss out on the joy and hope of the gospel.

(2) Don’t run from God: run to him.

- Let the weight of suffering drive you to cry out to God.¹⁶
- It’s okay to have questions and doubts, but don’t let them push you from the one who has answers.

(3) Don’t shift the blame: own your part.

- Every problem in our world, at its core is because of *someone’s* sin. That doesn’t mean that every problem in your life is because of *your* sin.
- Sometimes you sin, and sometimes you are sinned against. The first you need to repent of, the second you need to heal from.
- I didn’t focus on this a lot, because it shows up in next week’s chapter as well, but the Israelites are experience a lot of suffering *because* of their sin.
 - “Jerusalem sinned grievously” (v. 8).

¹⁵ Inspired by Luther via Barth on the Syro-Phoenician woman.

¹⁶ “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it” (The Talmud).

- “The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word” (v. 18).
- “I have been very rebellious” (v. 20).
- When God brings judgment for sin, his people must honestly grieve its devastation, humbly acknowledge their guilt, and cry out to him for mercy.
- We need to **lament destruction**, but also **lament the rebellion that caused destruction**.
 - “Open your heart, fire your inner lawyer. I can say that because I have an inner law firm” (Tripp). Do I hate my sin more than I hate the suffering in the world brought on by the sins of others? Am I willing to own my part in the brokenness of this world?

We have to accept the rebellion of our ways, the righteousness of God, and turn to him. If anyone can fix this, it has to be him

(4) Don't miss the hope: trust Christ.

- “The Lord is in the right” (v. 18). The Lord is righteous. The same righteousness that demands he punish sin is the same righteousness that is our only hope for salvation.
- We see a people abandoned, judged, and rejected.
 - Jesus took our rejection, so we could be accepted.
 - He took our judgment, so we could be forgiven.
 - He bore the yoke of transgression (v. 14); he was crushed and afflicted (v. 15), so that we could receive his righteousness.
- Lamentations 1 shows us what sin deserves. It leaves us sitting in the ruins, saying, “The LORD is... right... I have rebelled.”
 - But the gospel tells us that Jesus stepped into those ruins. He took the loneliness, the judgment, the crushing weight of sin, not because he rebelled, but because we did.
 - So now, when we lament, we don't lament as people under judgment, we lament as people who have been rescued from it.
 - “Lament and gratitude are mirror concepts that highlight the same fundamental truth: we are dependent on the God who rescues us” (Kapic).
- Will you allow your suffering to drive you to the God who gave his life for you?