

Reflections on the Book of Lamentations

Compiled by Pastor Brad Beier, Living Hope Church

There are times in life when sadness, pain, and lament are in order. If ever there was a time, COVID-19 pandemic is one. Lamentations is the deepest, comprehensive prayer book of suffering. Jews read it annually on the 11 month, 9th day of the Jewish calendar Day of Tisha B'av, the start of a 40 day period of continuous holy days ending with Succot (a celebration of harvest/resurrection).

Consider (read!) the book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible

Why enter lament? It's better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting – Ecclesiastes. The Benefit of lament: not just distracting ourselves from hard realities with our regular amusements, such as our screens.

Walter Bruggemann in *Peace*- The theology of the “haves” who “do not expect or need intrusion...but they rejoice in the stability [and the] durability of a world and social order that has been beneficial to them.” Thank God that we have it so good!”

Well, with COVID, we're all in it now, obviously some harder than others. Chicago is 30% black people but are a disproportionate 70% of COVID deaths in Chicago. Not all black folks are poor, but a large percentage of the poor in Chicago are black, poverty→worse health→more vulnerable to disease and death. That's a reason to lament.

Bruggemann compares the “haves” to the “have nots” who in suffering and survival are “aware of the acute precariousness of their situation.” Their worship is dependent, a cry for deliverance. “O God, you're the only good thing we have, please deliver us from all this evil!”

The thing about Lament is that we all will find wide open ways to enter in. I don't think it will be hard for you to think about deep sadness you've felt, loss you've experienced, sins you've committed, brokenness in the people and world around you. But Lamentations is the epitome of suffering, the funeral of all funerals, because it was the death of so many Jewish people, place (Jerusalem), their precious temple, way of life.

Context of Lamentations: Jeremiah 39:1-12 and 52 Ancient Israel had been called out as God's people, but as we all know personally, our sin has consequences. For the idolatry, immorality, and injustices in the southern kingdom of Judah, God's raised up the Babylonian army as the agent of His divine discipline, first carried off the temple treasures of gold and bronze, an initial wave of captives, then surrounded Jerusalem for 1 and ½ year siege. Egypt called to help, but in BC 586 Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem, burns the temple, carries off thousands captives. But the Babylonians left the poorest people to remain in the land and gave them vineyards and fields to care for. The prophet Jeremiah was the only educated person left in the land mentioned. Tradition and common sense tell us that Jeremiah the weeping prophet first hand eyewitness account and allowing other voices to speak.

What is Lament?

1. **Lament is permission to talk truth about pain.** 40% of Psalms and the entire book of Lamentations compels us to go deep and let pain do its work. Romans 5 teaches us that

suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character (backbone), character produces true hope (alert/eager soul). Lament gives permission for others to grieve who have experienced much deeper pain/injustice.

2. **Lament is a protest to God, rage against evil.** This is NOT how things should be. God, didn't you say otherwise in your covenant? Lament is not just a CRY of pain, nor just DESCRIBE the pain, but lament DECRIES the way things are.

In denying that this is OK, that status quo is not acceptable, we will not just quietly suffer, lament is a protest and a petition to make things better. Even if we have to wait, we don't wait muzzled. Yes there is a time for silence. To shut our mouths before God. To sit in dust and ashes. But also a time to cry to heaven. It's OK to ask "Why?" and "How did it come to this?" and "How long, O Lord?"

3. **Lament shares secrets that God already knows-** not just complaining or sadness, but a conversation with God about suffering, getting an audience with the One who is in some real sense, the only One who can ultimately bring healing. He who searches hearts and minds. Word exposes and divides bone deep
4. **Lament tells the truth about suffering. Lamentations 1:3 Exile** – remember Jeremiah 29 teaches two responses to exile: flight or flourish (escape or engage). Deal with reality and thrive, not just survive. In Jer 28, False prophets like Hananiah promised falsely that the hope that the exile would only last 2 years (it lasted 70). We can't hurry through the suffering. God is faithful, but he often seems to want us to marinate in suffering to soften the tough parts of our hearts and make them tender like a tough cut of meat.

Suffering is not usually a bump on the road as much as the road itself. Despite bestselling book titles like "Your best life now" billions of people in this world hope and pray that THIS life is not the best there is, but long for a better world to come.

Prophets who "Dress the wound lightly (band aid on an amputated arm, who say Peace, peace, when there is no peace." (Jer 8:11)

No, true shalom is not just an absence of conflict and pain, but acknowledgement, engagement with the suffering. We can't just wear plastic smiles and shout a hallelujah and expect the pain to go away. Lament is an integral part of bringing full shalom.

Like knowing and accounting for the cause of an injury or disease is an important part of healing and not repeating the cycle that brings brokenness again.

We can't promise ease and comfort, we can't predict when particular pain will end, because God's ways are not our ways, they are higher and wiser, and more complex. But he is faithful. He is good and working all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

False promise and false prophecy predicts and promises worldly wealth, health, and success.

5. **Lament tells the truth and trusts God.** The truth of hardship and trust of God's Lordship can be found in Habakkuk 3:17 seasons when medical heroes contract viruses and respirators are in short supply: TRUTH: "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls." That's truth, but we also see trust in Habakkuk 3:18

“YET I WILL REJOICE in Yahweh, I will take JOY in the God of my salvation. GOD the Lord is my strength!” We can trust, because we serve a Savior who died and rose and promises us the same.

6. Lament gives some sense to senselessness by bringing some order in the chaos. A language, words to events that leave us speechless.

Each chapter (ch 5 not so much!) of Lamentations is structured by the 22 Letter

Hebrew alphabetic: Acrostic structure gives boundaries to the grief. Lament is A-Z, comprehensive space to deal with all the depths, and nothing can be added to it, but there's a shape, structure, and order to the chaos. It's messy and ugly, but there's still purpose to it, a place for it, a hope that there's even a reason to record the lament and recommend it to the reader and fellow sufferer. It's hard medicine, doesn't taste good, and don't overdose on it, but take some for the pain.

Lamentations 3 is triple acrostic, emphasized. The Chiastic (literary device) center of the book is the hope. “The Steadfast love of Yahweh never ceases, His Mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Yahweh is the portion of my soul, therefore I will hope in him.” But hope must **wait**, for we need to give the lament its full **weight**. Lament and its subtle hope are one of our best tools for struggling through grief.

Further Recommendations

[Lamentations: Worship in a Minor Key](#)

Langberg, Diana, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Redeems*

Rah, Soong-Chan, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*