

## **The Book of Lamentations.**<sup>1</sup> (slide.1)

As Mark shared a few weeks ago, we're spending these summer months looking at the prayers of the OT saints. In doing so, it's our hope to show how each of these prayers serve as reminders to us that there is no experience in life that cannot be brought before the Father through the work of His Son. I think this is especially true when we consider today's topic—this experience of lament, especially during times when we're gripped with struggle and uncertainty and pain. Some of us may be there right now; all of us know people we love who are in that place even as we speak. So we want to walk through some ideas as we go through the text, and in the end, consider how these ideas connect to the work of Christ. Some of this works hand-in-hand with the things Mark spoke of last week. Debi already read part of our text from the book of Lamentations, so let's open by looking to our Lord in prayer (slide/black.2).

So the other day I'm at the new Barnes & Noble here on the corner of Fletcher and Dale Mabry. And I'm looking at the bookshelves (especially in the personal growth and wellness sections). I'm scanning the tiles and flipping through some of the books, and I'm reminded once again that we live in a world that promises "the good life." A world that tells us that everything we need to be happy and fulfilled and free from pain and difficulty is there at our fingertips. It's there for just \$29.99 (or \$15.99 if we buy the paperback). And yet there is a wisdom from above that is a little more honest as it speaks of a world that is broken, and of the *reality* of pain and difficulty, and contrary to what we see in the world around us (and even in many of our churches), it speaks of a call, not to run from pain, but instead to lean into the pain and from that to lament—to cry out to the Lord with honesty.

We see this in the psalms. Well over a third of them focus on lament.<sup>2</sup> We especially see this in the book of Lamentations. This is a book that lives up to its name. Honestly, it is unlike anything else we see in Scripture. Tradition holds that it was written by the prophet Jeremiah in response to the devastation on the city of Jerusalem caused by the Babylonian armies in 587 B.C.<sup>3</sup> The temple is destroyed. The citizens of Jerusalem are brutally killed. Many of those who survive are yanked from their homeland and taken some 600 miles to Babylon. Everything familiar has vanished. Everything recognizable is out of joint. The temple is gone; and as far as the people of Jerusalem are concerned, *God is gone as well.*<sup>4</sup>

## **The Structure of the Poems.**

So here's Jeremiah; he's prompted by the Holy Spirit and begins to write. But he responds to the pain of his circumstances, not by writing an essay, but by writing poetry. He writes five poems in all. Each poem is a poem of lament. Each poem of lament drips with anguish. Each poem is like a raw wound that is thrust before the reader. Jeremiah (slide.3) speaks of a city that was once full of people, but is now deserted. A city that was once queen of the earth, but is now a slave. A city that (slide.4) sobs through the night, with none left to comfort her. A city whose friends have betrayed her and have become her enemies. Jeremiah goes on to say (slide.5) that he feels like God has walled him in so he can't escape. Even when he cries out for help, he feels like no one is listening to his prayers. He feels like God has blocked his way with a high stone wall and has made the road in front of him crooked (slide/black.6).

Yet despite the brokenness and chaos of these verses, there is something strangely orderly about this book. You see, most of the poems found in the Book of Lamentations are written in the form of an acrostic. Each poem is 22 stanzas long—one stanza for (slide.7) each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first (slide.8) stanza begins with the *first* letter. The second (slide.9) stanza begins with the second letter. The third (slide.10) with the third letter, and so on. Now if you think about it, it's a strange structure being used by Jeremiah. If I was in that much pain/lament, I really don't think I would want to take the time and work out this acrostic/alphabetical thing. Why go to the trouble? But that's what Jeremiah does. Even when he is clearly writing of a world that is falling apart around him, he's writing of it in a way that is mindful of a God who is a God of order (slide/black.11).

Years ago, after the funeral of our father, my brother and sister, and their families and my family returned to our mother's home. As we entered the house, a piece of me expected to see it in disarray. After all, with the death of our dad, a lot had happened over the past couple of days. But as we entered, I noticed that everything was tidy and in its place. Furthermore, once we got settled, my mom began bringing out (slide.12) food she had prepared over the day before. Trust me, given the circumstances, not one of us would have "faulted" our mom for ordering a couple pizzas from Papa Johns (or nothing at all). But that's not what she did. Instead, she took the time to clean the house and cook (slide/black.13). So why did she do that? Why go to the trouble? Well, knowing our mom, it was her way of bringing clarity to a time of her life that was otherwise chaotic; her way of bringing order to a moment that was otherwise disordered. And it seems that this is what we have (slide.14) here in the structure of our lament. Despite the harsh turmoil of all that swirls around us, God remains a God of order—in creation, in wisdom, in providence. Right now, even in what you're going through, despite the craziness of the world around us, Jeremiah's poems, *even in their structure*, are reminders that God is in control.

## **A Prayer of Hope.**

So Jeremiah prays (slide/black.15). And as he prays, he pours out his heart and pours out his soul. He looks to the Lord and asks Him to (slide.16) remember his "affliction" and his "wandering," the "wormwood" and the "bitterness." He says, "Surely my soul remembers and is bowed down within me." There's no denial on Jeremiah's part. There's no false optimism or an attempt to simply shake it off. And yet, he acknowledges that the memories of sorrow are not the only memories he has. In verse 21 (slide.17) he speaks of *something else* he calls to mind; "this I call to mind and therefore I have hope." What is Jeremiah doing? He's preaching a sermon. He's preaching a sermon not only to his readers, he's also preaching that sermon to himself (he's the audience). He's saying, ±"Look, I'm not naïve to the affliction, to the wandering, to the wormwood, to the bitterness; I get it. But this I call to mind..." The Hebrew is even stronger; it's more like (slide.18): "But this I cause to return to my heart."<sup>5</sup> And what is "this" that he's causing to return to his heart? It's the (slide.19) "The steadfast love of the Lord." It's God's (slide.20) *hesed*.

This word *hesed* is one of those ten-thousand-dollar Hebrew words that cause translators to scratch their heads. It's (slide.21) multilayered and multifaceted. It's like an intricately woven tapestry where each thread contributes to the larger picture and is revealed over time. It speaks of God's mercy, kindness, favor, and covenant loyalty. It's connected to His goodness, devotion, beauty, compassion, and unfailing love.<sup>6</sup> It's these things that (slide.22) "never cease." These things that "never come to an end." They never wear out, they never grow weak, they don't dissipate, they don't diminish, they don't vanish over time. Instead, they are made "new every morning." They're made fresh and vital each and every day.<sup>7</sup> So much so that Jeremiah can sing (slide.23), "Great is Thy faithfulness."

Now, if I was Jeremiah, *here's* where I would have ended my book (slide.24): poem #1, poem #2, half of poem #3, and then (slide.25) verses 22-23 ("*steadfast love of the Lord,*" "*mercies never come to an end,*" "*new every morning,*" "*great is Your faithfulness.*") And with that, bring the entire book to a close.

*But that's not at all what happens.* Instead, Jeremiah (slide.26) returns to his words of lament as he continues to cry out to God for mercy and restoration. In fact, by the time we get to the fifth poem, the prophet does away with his acrostic/alphabetical design structure and instead (slide.27) doubles down and goes darker as he lets out raw, untethered, chaotic cries of pain over a life that feels broken and hopeless. And with that the book of Lamentations end with a "thud" (slide/black.28)

## **A Place for Lament.**

There's an author; his name is (slide.29) Drew Hyun. Hyun is a Korean-American and a pastor in NYC. He recently wrote a book on grief; and in his book, he mentions a Korean concept that is used to describe deep sorrow/sadness/pain. He writes that this concept is summed up in a single Korean word, it's the word (slide.30) *han*. The author remembers once asking his mother, "What is *han*?" She responded by saying that it's hard to explain in words, that it's kind of like (slide.31) "waaaaaaaah." Something guttural and visceral. A feeling of powerlessness and helplessness. So what does Hyun do? He uses this to speak of lament (and in particular the lament found in the pages of Scripture) as something that gives voice to the *han* in our lives.<sup>8</sup>

Lament is a form of protest (slide/black.32). It acknowledges the horrible things that have happened. It recognizes our confusion and our doubts, it calls attention to emotions and frustrations. It's the honest cry of a hurting heart that is not afraid to ask questions of God, as it seeks to put into words that which is often beyond words.<sup>9</sup>

And yet the language of lament is often strange for us, especially in our day and age. Even in the church. We don't like to see people sad; we don't like to see them grieve. So one of the more common ways for us to deal with suffering is to just gloss over it, or to treat it lightly, or to tell people to be strong and soldier through, or to tell them to slap on a big smile and to feign happiness. But the book of Lamentations (and so much of the rest of Scripture) won't let us do that. It's as if it's saying to us, "*Please stop and see and feel the horror and the destruction and the pain of what happened. This is what occurred. This is what we went through. This is what we felt.*"<sup>10</sup> I love how Christopher Wright puts it. Wright is an Irish theologian (Mark quoted him a couple of weeks ago). He writes that (slide.33)...

To ignore the Book of Lamentations is to disrespect those who suffered. To ignore that voice is like throwing a drape over all the memorials that commemorate the names of those who died in wartime, and all that was suffered by their families. (slide.34) Lamentations is a summons to remember realities endured by real people like ourselves, to bear witness, and to pay heed to their voice.<sup>11</sup>

After all, life is good; but life can also be disappointing (slide/black.35). Jobs are lost, promising careers falter, businesses fail. We get sick, we lose loved ones, children wander, relationships end. I suppose part of our problem is that we develop a sense of expectation as to *what* God will do and *how* He will do it. We think we have it figured out, and we write the script. But sometimes the script is flipped and the tapestry is snagged.<sup>12</sup> And yes, we can do our best and bite the bullet and pretend nothing's wrong. But that's not what we see in the pages of Scripture. The book

of Lamentations calls us to come before God with raw, unmitigated honesty. But it calls us to always remember who God is. I suppose that's why the text (slide.36) is designed as it is. It's not designed to show us that every day wraps up with a tidy bow. But it does show us that, through it all, our God and His *hesed*—His mercy, kindness, favor, goodness, devotion, beauty, compassion, steadfast love, and covenant is central. It never ceases; it never comes to an end. Therefore, with Jeremiah, we can declare that (slide.37) the Lord is our portion, and that we will hope in Him. And that, with the psalmist, we can state that (slide.38) He is our refuge and our times are in His hand.

### **The Gospel.**

**So why (slide/black.39) were the people of the OT charged to go before the Lord, even with their doubts/ questions/uncertainties/tears? The reason why is because there is help in no other name!** And yet that which is mentioned in the OT is underscored all the more in the NT through the work of Jesus. This Jesus who publicly wept and lamented at Lazarus' tomb over the state of death and over a world that is not what it was supposed to be, willingly took the punishment of the cross, and lost His humanity so we might gain ours.

So we read in (slide.40) Revelation 21 of a day when our Lord will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death will be no more, and mourning, and crying, and pain, and the other former things will all pass away. And He who is seated on the throne declares, "*Behold, I am making all things new.*" And that's not poetic hyperbole; our Lord means what He says. Our hearts and minds; our souls and bodies. And the reason why is set before us in (slide.41) Heb 4:15 where we're told that "*we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet did not sin.*"

Only (slide/black.42) Jesus can bear the weight of our pain. Only Jesus can bear the weight of our circumstances. This Jesus who *out of love* paid the price to set us free. This Jesus who *in lament* lost the presence of the Father so we might have it forever. This Lord who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. This Lord who does not change, yet changes everything.

So we come to Him, not only when all is well with our souls, but even when it's not. Not with pretense and religious language, but again with the honest cry of a hurting heart. Not by our own power and strength, but by the power and strength of our Lord and Savior.

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation reading: Psalm Ps 31:1-4, 15-16 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Card, *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching out to God in the Lost Language of Lament* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 21; Drew Hyun, *Beautiful, Disappointing, Hopeful: How Gratitude, Grief, and Grace Reflect the Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2025), 102.

<sup>3</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 327.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Run With the Horses: The Quest For Life At Its Best* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983, 2009), 145.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *The Message of Lamentations*, BST, 111.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Card, *Inexpressible: Heseid and the Mystery of God's Lovingkindness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 164-66; Adele Berlin, *Lamentations*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 93; R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 225; Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, TOTC, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, UBC (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 368.

<sup>8</sup> Drew Hyun interviewed by John Dickson, *Undeceptions*, 4/27/25; cf. Hyun, *Beautiful, Disappointing, Hopeful*, 114-15.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Mackie, *Read Scripture: Illustrated Summaries of Biblical Books* (Portland: The Bible Project, 2017), 50.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Lamentations*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 118, 35; Richard Benton and Fr. Marc Boulos, "Lamentations," *The Bible as Literature Podcast* (ephesusschool.org), 10/09/14.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, *The Message of Lamentations*, BST, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Leah Fortson, "Lamentation 3:19-24" (sermon, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016).