

January 10, 2021

“The Holy Stones Lie Scattered”

From the Series, “Lament and the People of God: The Book of Lamentations”

Lamentations 1:1-3, 16-20; 4:11-18

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This morning we are heading into some different waters. When I knew that I would be preaching these two weeks, right at the beginning of the new year... a lot of different thoughts came. What should we look at together?

Where did I want to go with this? Where was God nudging me?

Shortly before Christmas, I was looking over at my bookcases, and one book just kept staring back at me, and it was a commentary by Tremper Longman on the book of Lamentations. I started thinking about the difficulty of this past year... a pandemic, racial tension, political tension. And even though turning to a New Year does bring hope and excitement for what could be different... the events of this past week, bring us back to this troubling season we're living in... A new year! Oh well.

Lamentations is not a book of the Bible preached on often. In fact, when I was talking with TJ about it, in his 30 years here at Park Road, he's never preached through it.

There are a number of reasons for that... It's not an easy book to read. It's called Lamentations... The title of the book describes its genre. All five chapters are poems of lament... The poet, cries out from pain and destruction, on behalf of his community... In fact, scholars define the five chapters as *funeral dirges*. They have the cadence of something that would have been read aloud at funeral... Which would not have been an unfamiliar style of writing in the Ancient Near East. In antiquity, the title of the book translated, “How?” Which is the very question of Lament.

Traditionally, many believed Jeremiah to have been the writer of the book, because it reads similar to the book of Jeremiah, and Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet... *more contemporary scholars are less confident about it being written by Jeremiah*... What matters though... is that the writer, was very clearly a witness to a great and utter calamity. A destruction... a National tragedy. The complete and utter dismantling of Jerusalem and the carrying off of God's people into Exile by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

The book recounts the horrors of those moments... the confusion... the seeming hopelessness of the situation... In every way, it is a lament... As Tremper Longman writes, “a lament is a cry uttered when life falls apart...” And for the people of God... for Jerusalem... life was destroyed.

Sometimes, you'll see Lamentations and the book of Job are compared because of their focus on lament... but Job's focus is on personal lament... Lamentations is focused primarily on the lament of a community. A city. A people. Because of that... though the historical context is the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of 586 BC... this book has instructed, and will continue to instruct the people of God, on how we are to lament as a community. How we lament as the people of God.

So... Why are we looking at this now?

A few weeks ago, we looked at the subject of time, and the turning of a new year, and how our lives are like a vapor in God's time... With all that we are soaking in as a society, and have been soaking in for the past year... and as the people of God... I believe it is good and necessary for us to turn to the place in the Bible where the people of God lament together... There is much to lament over in our world... And if we as followers of Jesus, don't receive our instruction and formation on how to lament from the scriptures... we will receive our instruction and formation on how to lament from the world. From social media. From our neighbors. From our own family members.

So, today and next week... we'll look at Lamentations... Today, we face the brunt of what has caused the Lament... Destruction... And next week... while not resolved... we see that in the middle of destruction... there is a way to see God's presence even in the turmoil....

I want us today to look at three brief points...

1. A City Shattered. 2. A Lament Offered. And 3. A People Scattered.
1. A City Shattered – v. 1 *How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she who was great among the nations!*

One of the characteristics of this book is the poet's use of personification...

The writer presents the city, Jerusalem, as a widow... a grieving widow who once was bright, and shining to the world... brimming with people...

Two years ago, if you were with us, we studied the Old Testament book of Judges... the theme of that book was this cycle Israel went through... Remember, God established a covenant with Abraham... Israel was his chosen people, called to live uniquely in the world... called to be a blessing to the world...

But time and again in Judges, the people would wander into sin, towards other gods and idols, and time and again, God would raise up a rescuer, and redeemer, a judge... and on and on this downward spiral went...

Then, this past fall we looked at the book of 1 Samuel, where God raises up this final judge, Samuel... to call the people back... but the people again, keeping God's covenant relationship at arm's length... want a king like all the other nations... so God gives them Saul... and Saul's reign is filled with tragedy... lost battles... remember the ark of the covenant being taken... and in the end God himself says, "I regret making Saul, King."

Well, that pattern continues throughout the rest of Israel's history...

they go through the highs of David and Solomon, and then the lows of the period of kings... yes, there are some who temporarily restore faithfulness to God and his covenant... but this downward spiral continues... until it reaches a breaking point... one prophet after another comes to call the people back... and the people continue in their sin, turning to idols rather than God, and practicing injustice against the poor...

Remember, God initiated this covenant with them... and a biblical covenant meant great blessings... there were incredible blessings that came to the people of Israel because of this relationship with God... but there were great responsibilities and conditions that came as well... and when they failed time and again to repent. Finally, God brings his judgment.

God allowed the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, to be destroyed by the Assyrians who carried the 10 tribes of the north off into exile... And in 586, the poet of Lamentations... watches on in horror as the Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem and carry off the people of Judah into Exile... The City is shattered... v. 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.”*

Let me read you something Philip Yancey wrote about how grief and sorrow can envelop a community... *“Shortly after Christmas 2012, I addressed the New England town of Newtown, Connecticut, a community reeling from the murder of 20 schoolchildren and 6 teachers and staff just days prior. An ambulance driver captured the mood in Newtown well. “All of us on the fire and ambulance corps are volunteers,” he told me. “We don’t train for something like this—nobody does. And my wife is a teacher at Sandy Hook. She knew all 20 children by name as well as the staff. After hiding out during the carnage, she had to walk past the bodies of her colleagues in the hallway.”*

He paused to control his voice, then continued: “Everyone experiences grief ... Usually, though, you bear grief as if in a bubble. You go to the grocery store. You go back to work. Eventually that outer world takes over more of you, and the grief begins to shrink. Here in Newtown, we go to the store and see memorials to the victims. We walk down the street and see markers on the porches of those who lost a child. It’s like a bell jar has been placed over the town, with all the oxygen pumped out. We can’t breathe for the grief.”

How does one respond to such an event? Such a disaster?
How does a community of people respond? A church?

v. 16 shows us... 2. The Lament Offered by the Poet...

“For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me... v. 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.”

Last Summer, I led a 10-week online Sunday school class, called Rejoicing in Lament... All of us, experience tremendous hardship and difficulties at points in life... but, there are also times when collectively, as a community of people, we experience hardship together... This past year... not being able to worship together in person for some time... Still, there are people in this congregation, that we have not been able to see in almost a year! Think of that! A Year! That is something we should, and need to lament over. To grieve over.

The right response for the people of God in moments of chaos and confusion is to do what the poet is doing here... bringing their tears to God... *“For these things I weep... my eyes flow with tears...”*

One of the problems the modern world and the modern person faces, is that in the face of difficulty, we race past the stage of grief and lament, in order to fix, or give opinion, or post... or move through it quickly... Instead of what we see throughout the Psalms and what we see here... We bring our lament... we offer it to the Lord.

Friends... there is of course so much to give thanks to God for over the past year... but there is A LOT to lament over. In every area of life...

And if we cannot take our cues from the scriptures and lament...

Then we will never make it through to the other side of Gospel joy...

You know, the Jewish tradition, many of our Jewish neighbors here in Hollywood... have had a practice throughout the generations called Sitting Shiva - They call it *shiva* (which means seven, or sits of seven). When there is a death, the closest family members come together: the father and mother, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, and spouses. They come together and sit. But they don't sit alone: all their friends and family come and sit with them. They sit until the healing begins.

They sit because they want you to know you're not alone in your sorrow.

They sit together for seven days, and here's what I love about the seventh day—everyone in the community comes on the seventh day, and they walk with them around the block.

The subtle message is, *you can begin to live again. We know you hurt, and we hurt with you, but you can heal over.*

Here, the scriptures give us the mechanism for how we cry out to God... we bring our tears, our chaos, and our confusion and we cry out to him...

When we do not understand what is happening in the world, or in our bodies, or in our neighborhood... we cry out to God. We grieve.... Henri Nouwen once wrote, *"I am beginning to see that much of praying, is grieving."*

The book of Lamentations is a lament, yes for the destruction of Jerusalem... but it's also a lament for their sin. The poet doesn't mince words... v. 18 - *"The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word; but hear, all you peoples, and see my suffering."*

Here again, we are being given language for how as God's people we are to respond... we grieve, we cry out... we own sin. We label sin for what it is... and we acknowledge brokenness and suffering. We cry out that all is not well... in our hearts...in our communities, and in the world. When we do this... properly lament, together... we own our sin, our failure, our mistakes... And we finally recognize the ways we have been going about things... Our actions, our words, our conduct... the ways we go about trying to save ourselves or make a name for ourselves... Attaching ourselves to this group or that group... All of them fail us...

v. 19 - *"I called to my lovers but they deceived me..."*

And like the Poet... we are left with the consequences...

A broken life, a broken community, a broken world...

We are like... our final point... *3. A people scattered...*

In the last section that we read, from chapter 4... it's about as bleak as it can get... The poet describes the very wrath of God falling upon them... v. 11... Think about these words... this happened.... *"The Lord gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion."*

For the people of God... this is as bad as it gets. This is the low. This is the bottom... v. 16 – *"The Lord himself has scattered them; he will regard them no more... v. 17, "Our eyes failed, ever watching vainly for help; in our watching we watched for a nation which could not save." ... we watched for a nation which could not save."*

I want to come back to the question... Why read and study the book of Lamentations? Personally, I think many of us know... That in order to truly understand God's work in our lives... we have to go all the way to the bottom... You cannot begin to grasp the grace of Jesus... the love of Jesus... without coming to the very bottom or your sin...

But I want to say this morning... that communally... as a society... as a church... Together... We cannot fully understand the fullness of what God is doing in the world, and his purposes, until we come to the very bottom...

This past year, has reminded us of the brokenness of this world...
This past week... has reminded us that the hope of 2021, is a false hope...
It has reminded us of the brokenness of politics, power, personality...
Social media... the pursuit of secret, I want to be on the inside, knowledge- a kind of modern-day *Gnosticism*...

All of those attempts to make something of ourselves through opinion, or power, or esteem... Until we come to the bottom of all of this....
In our own hearts... and in our community and society... we cannot fully grieve and lament brokenness... And we cannot fully embrace grace...

In the passages we read today... there is no hope. There is no resolution.
And that's why we don't hear sermons from Lamentations often...

However... let us make sure to hear this... Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th century Abbott...beautifully captured the grieving heart of our Lord Jesus in his well-known hymn, *"O sacred Head now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down, Now scornfully surrounded with thorns Thy only crown ... "*

Half way through Handel's Messiah is this short piece, *"Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow..."*

The poet of Lamentations cries out over the destruction of his city... his people... but as we will see next week... the only hope, the only sliver of hope is that He knows God holds the covenant... and one day, all of the destruction and broken things will somehow be made right... God will restore...

All will be made right... through the grief and sorrow, and the destruction of the body of Jesus Christ on the cross. O sacred head now wounded with grief and shame weighed down.

As bleak as things may seem... as down as we may be over the events of this past year, this past week... the hope of the Christian... is that unlike the poet, *God's wrath and judgment has not fallen on us*. It Will not fall on those who believe... because it has fallen on Jesus Christ. He has taken it upon his head... his temple, his body was destroyed...

Instead, because he was raised to new life... We receive adoption into his family... the fullness of the riches of heaven... And in this life... we follow his lead. We grieve. We lament. We cry out when things have fallen apart... We do it together. But, we do it belonging to Him. Friends, it is only in Jesus that we find rescue and safety... and it is only in Him that we find meaning and fulfillment... He is the man of sorrows... He is the one who knows every grief you have.

I don't know what this past year has been like for all of you...
I know some of the stories... Some of you are hurt...
Some of you have a deep anger inside over disappointments...
Jobs, decisions been made...
Some of you I'm sure have faced down the abyss of mental health issues...

All of that... Jesus knows...
All of that, the Bible has language for...
All of that, other Christians before you have endured as well...
And there is Hope and grace for all of that in Jesus Christ.

So, in a new year... let's begin by first lamenting and grieving sin, and loss, and brokenness... and rejoice in God's great love and acceptance of us...
who moves close to us in our sadness.... and trouble.
He is with you... Let's cry out to him.

Let's Pray.