

Restore Us To Yourself That We May Be Restored

Lamentations 5:1-22

Christmas is a season of joy!
In Christ we have true reason for happiness!

Isaac Watts in his great hymn Joy to the World said it so well:

No more let sin and sorrow grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,

And yet, for some, Christmas is only a reminder that life is not as it should be. For many the season of Christmas only invokes feelings of depression.

The book of Lamentations has largely been a corporate expression of the sorrows. Chapter 5, the last chapter, is in many respects a repetition of what we have seen so far. There is great sorrow over the depths to which God's people have fallen. They were once the crown jewel of the world. But the crown has fallen off.

Those who remain alive, continually are reminded that what was once good has been lost. What remains is a shattered mess. That shattered mess fills the hearts of the people with depression.

Look down at verses 15-17.

Lamentations 5:15-17 ¹⁵ The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. ¹⁶ The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned! ¹⁷ For this our heart has become sick, for these things our eyes have grown dim,

The heart that is sick and the eyes that have grown dim describes the person who is depressed. And this depression, although not desirable, has served many good purposes.

The Book of Lamentations has taught how to grieve in a way that accomplishes good purposes, and remains fixed upon biblical truth, Christ-centered truth.

2 Corinthians 7:10 ¹⁰ For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

The pathway to restoration and joy includes such things as humility, repentance, submission, trust in the character of God, hope for Divine Mercy, and... prayer.

Through Jeremiah's lament we can ourselves better yearn for the restoration of our lives. We can pray along with Jeremiah,

Lamentations 5:21 ²¹ Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored!
Renew our days as of old -

I spoke last week that we cannot live in a nostalgic view of the past. But here we see that our hope for the future is somewhat grounded in the past. There is a desire, not to return, but to restore what was good in the past.

There is a dangerous trend that is happening in our world. It is a trend that doesn't see the restoration of what is good as the goal at all. Instead, it is better to change our idea of what is good altogether.

Most of us are familiar with the fairy tale ending – And they lived “happily ever after.” In fairy tales there is usually some evil that messes up life as it should be. And, as the story unfolds, the main character, usually a princess, is trying to overcome the evil surrounding her. Eventually her prince charming rescues her from the evil and they get married and live “happily ever after.”

Not many actually experience “happily ever after” in this life. But the fairy tale helps us to yearn for what is good and to not lose hope that some degree of happiness can be experienced in our lives.

But recently I watched a movie called “godmothered”. Not a bad movie in many respects. Had some cute moments. But the plot line was revealing as to how our world is changing in not so good ways.

The school for “fairy godmothers” is in trouble. Why? Because no one believes in “happily ever after”. They have some magic to help people along in their finding “happily ever after” but because no one actually asks for it anymore, they are going to close down the school.

Of course, one young fairy godmother finds one assignment. In the midst of trying to help one lady to find her one true love and find “happily ever after”, she discovers that part of the problem is that they have too narrow of a view of what “happily ever after” might look like. What is needed really to change and alter our view of “happily ever after.” (the ideal)

Once they figure this out, everyone wants a little help and the godmother school is saved. In the movie, it of course ends with everyone dancing and having fun. All is well.

Only not all is well. The definition of “happily ever after” (the ideal of what is good) has been changed.

But it is not good to change the ideal.

True happiness is the fruit of conforming more and more to the established ideal of old, the ideal established by God.

While the Bible does give us a hope of a New Creation – a place where all things will be made new and things will not be exactly like this present creation – the Bible always calls us to yearn for the restoration of life before sin and before the curse. There was an ideal that was lost, and God is working to restore us to that ideal.

This yearning for restoration is good. And yearning for the ideal, even while experiencing the shattering of personal hopes and dreams, should be a regular part of our prayers.

Chapter 5 is a prayer. It is a prayer for restoration.

So, I want to look at the lament in a slightly different way today.

I want us to see the lament as an inverse way of understanding the ideal which has been lost.

As we get grieve over the ideal that was lost, we also direct our prayers as to what we want God to restore to us.

I love to see old homes “restored” to their original beauty. There is something special about looking at a beautiful home that looks, as much as possible, like it did originally.

One of the ways that this is done is to go back, if possible, and look at old pictures of the house when it was first built. From these pictures, the builders can understand better what they are attempting to restore. Without them it is really only a guessing game.

There is a reason why the Bible begins with Genesis. The first few chapters of Genesis gives to us pictures of the original. And it helps to define for us what is good. Over and over again God declares, “It is good.”

Read Lamentations 5:1-16.

Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us;
look, and see our disgrace!

The lament begins with a prayer that God would remember them in their terrible, depressing situation.

That a prayer like this can even be prayed is wonderful.

All that has happened to Israel is the result of God’s sovereign hand.

Jeremiah prays as if God did not have anything to do with their disgrace.

How can God both have ordained their sufferings and then look upon them as if someone else has done them?

Suffering, in the life of a Christian, is complex. There are multiple complementary ways to view our broken lives.

Suffering is a form of God’s discipline.

We must search our hearts to know if we are harboring some form of rebellion.

If so, we must repent of that rebellion.

And we must cast ourselves on Christ alone to atone for our sins.

But having sincerely dealt with our own sin, we are to have a clean conscience before our God.

And as a reconciled child of God, we have a right to ask God to deal with the losses that we have experienced. It is right to ask God for restoration.

If it has come as the result of the evil intentions of others, God will indeed avenge those wrongs.

If it has come as the result of the general curse upon this world (disease, birth defects, natural disasters, etc.) God will both grieve with us and give us promises of the complete lifting of the curse in all its forms.

This is why the angels can proclaim with the coming of Jesus Christ: Joy to the world!

As believers in Jesus Christ, you have a right to ask God to remember your sufferings and to act favorably to bring restoration into your life.

You do not deserve this restoration. But it is your right to ask for none the less. Jesus deserves a perfect kingdom of “happily ever after” to be enjoyed with his bride: the Church.

² Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers,
our homes to foreigners.

The first aspect of the ideal that has been lost is that of having your own home.
The Babylonians had stolen their homes.

God had promised a home to his people. They had lost that home.
But God did not want them to forget the homes that he had promised to them. They were to lament that others were living in their homes.

We need to be careful here. We have such a propensity to fixate on the things of this world, that we can make idols of this world. That is what got the Israelites into trouble in the first place. We must seek first the kingdom of God. That being said, it is right for these Israelites to lament that foreigners were living in the homes that God had promised to them.

The best of life really belongs to God’s people. We must like Abraham set our hopes on a heavenly home, rather than the riches of this world. But in the New Heavens and New Earth, you will experience the absolute best that creation (the new creation) has to offer. The “riches” of the garden of Eden will be at your fingertips. Your home will be a mansion.

Keeping your eyes fixed upon your eternal home, it is also good to work to better your temporary homes as well.

Our temporary homes may be taken from us. But maintaining in our hearts the ideal of “home” is a good thing. It helps us to yearn rightly for the Day when Jesus will restore us eternally in the home he has prepared for us.

³ We have become orphans, fatherless;
our mothers are like widows.

Another aspect of “Restored Life” is that of family. And in particular, a family that enjoys a present and loving husband and father. Men, you are important to God’s ideal for the family.

Our culture many times opposes the thought of the patriarchal family. They want to change the ideal.

This is truly sad. The ideal of a good and godly husband and father protecting and providing for his family should be honored by all.

At the fall of Jerusalem, most men were gone, killed in battle or carried away in captivity. This was not as it should be among God's people.

We can honor the ideal, and mourn its loss, while also learning to make the best of a broken situation. Fewer and fewer families in America even approach the ideal. Fine, we cannot change what is. But don't buy into the lie that the ideal itself must somehow be changed. As if to say, "Let's try to redefine family so that a loving husband and father is no longer central to its existence."

No, the ideal should always be one of a man being present and lovingly providing for and protecting his wife and children. In the Lament, the women and children are yearning for a time where they would have husbands who would love them and provide and protect them.

It is possible to love our earthly family more than God's family. Jesus does call us to love him more than even our closest family members.

But the propensity of our hearts to make idols should not cause us to abandon the ideal of the family.

Of course, in the new heavens and new earth, Jesus will be that perfect husband for the Church. And, as we live in imperfect families now, we should continue to yearn for the complete restoration of "family" eternally.

God has designed the earthly family to help us have some grasp of the eternal family.

It is good to mourn over the brokenness of our families now.
And it is good to fix our hopes on God to restore us to the ideal of family.

⁴ We must pay for the water we drink;
the wood we get must be bought.

Another ingredient of "happily ever after" is that the basic necessities of life are provided for freely.

Verse 4 is a bit difficult to understand in our context.

Water was something that you drew from a community well, or from a local stream or river. You did not pay for it. But now foreigners controlled the water sources and demanded payment to use them.

The same was true of the wood. You could gather wood from the ground, or cut down a tree if necessary, but the thought of buying wood for building or for cooking or warmth was unthinkable. Only during the siege most of the wood was used up. And now it was scarce. And had to be purchased.

In our day, everything must be bought. Nothing comes free.

But as heirs of this world, God intends to graciously provide for your comfortable existence. You will not be buying water in eternity. It will be pure and refreshing. It may even come in a variety of flavors. And the wood (materials) for your home will also be freely provided. No child of God will wonder if he has enough. God will graciously give these things to his children.

God has designed the creation to meet the needs of his family. The curse makes this difficult. As we struggle to make ends meet in this world, may our hearts believe that God will one day restore the creation such that she will readily provide for our needs.

⁵ Our pursuers are at our necks;
we are weary;
we are given no rest.

The next ingredient of a restored life is that God's people will serve Him and not foreigners. Maybe the best way to think of this is that God's good gift of work will function as it should.

God's people could not walk about freely in their own land. Harsh masters pursued them and they were weary under their yoke.

Work is a gift from God. Work is an essential ingredient to our happiness. But too much work at the hands of cruel masters can be oppressive. In its extreme form, we call this slavery. There is no concern for the rest of the worker. Squeeze as much out of them as possible.

We should not yearn for a life of "no work". We should yearn for a life where work is balanced with rest. God models this for us in the establishment of the work week. Six days shall you labor. God has graciously provided rest on the Lord's Day so that we can worship, but also so that our labor does not become oppressive.

What will work be like in the New Heavens and New Earth? I am not sure. The entirety of that existence is in some ways called "Rest". The emphasis is "rest from sin" and "rest from labor in a world that lies under a curse." I am not sure that we should envision an eternity where we do not have some form of work to regularly engage ourselves. Of course, worship will be central to all that we do. But I do not think that it is right to see eternity as "only formal worship" but rather as the perfect balance between work and worship.

Restored life must include the proper balance of work and rest and worship.

I hope you can begin to see how the lament informs our picture of "happily ever after."

Elements of restored Life:

1. Home
2. Family
3. Provision of needs
4. Work/worship/rest

The Bible teaches us to care about these things. We should yearn for their restoration. And we should work to encourage and value them here, while understanding that their true fulfillment is found in Christ and in the New Heavens and New Earth.

6 We have given the hand
 to Egypt,
 and
 to Assyria,
 to get bread enough.

Another ingredient of restored life is that God's people will rely upon Him for their needs rather than those outside the kingdom.

Assyria and Egypt were enemies of God's people. It was not right that God's people were dependent upon them.

It is difficult for us to imagine in our modern society a life where we would not depend upon the outside world. Even the Amish in many ways depend upon the society around them. They are not entirely dependent upon God and themselves for life.

God makes it clear that his own people may have to choose suffering and death before bowing to the idols of this world. Compromise of the faith often occurs because we love our lives in this world more than loyalty to God.

That being said, it is right to yearn for the restoration of life where God will meet our every need. There will not be any dependence upon an unbelieving world.

And in our hearts, we must learn to depend upon God to meet all of our needs. Paul could be sitting in a Roman prison and write:

Philippians 4:19 ¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

7 Our fathers sinned,
 and
 are no more;
 and we bear their iniquities.

Another ingredient to restoration is a life in which one generation brings blessing on their children and grandchildren.

There is a continuity between one generation and another. For better or for the worse. It was for the worse here. But it can be for the better. Parents, through humble obedience to God, you can bring all sorts of blessing upon your children.

Children, if you have been blessed by your parents, do not let anyone guilt trip you into thinking this is somehow bad – calling it “privilege”. If someone does, tell them frankly, “It is true, I have

been given countless blessings through my parents and grandparents for which I am extremely thankful.”

Receiving privileges does not give you a right to be selfish with them. To whom much is given much is required. Seek to work hard and be a blessing to others, including those who come after you.

Instead of blessing, the Exiled Israelites were suffering, because their parents and grandparents had increasingly rebelled against God.

Now, their situation seemed hopeless. Verses 8-13 further describe the pains of a life in which God’s standards have been broken. I will simply read them without comment:

8 Slaves rule over us;
there is none to deliver us from their hand.
9 We get our bread at the peril of our lives,
because of the sword in the wilderness.
10 Our skin is hot as an oven with the burning heat of famine.
11 Women are raped in Zion,
young women in the towns of Judah.
12 Princes are hung up by their hands;
no respect is shown to the elders.
13 Young men are compelled to grind at the mill,
and
boys stagger under loads of wood.

Vv. 14-18 return us to the effects of life in a world that is broken – “Happily Ever After” is not a present reality.

14 The old men have left the city gate,
the young men their music.
15 The joy of our hearts has ceased;
our dancing has been turned to mourning.
16 The crown has fallen from our head;
woe to us,
for we have sinned!

This verse balances verse 7. It may be correct to see the faults of previous generations, but this does not make the present generations blameless victims. They too have sinned. Our culture loves to make ourselves the victim. The sins of others surely influence us. But they do not excuse our own sins. We are always morally responsible before our Holy God.

The crown here represents all that is good about Zion. But the crown has fallen to the ground.

17 For this our heart has become sick,
for these things our eyes have grown dim,
18 for Mount Zion which lies desolate;
jackals prowl over it.

God had established an ideal for Zion.
What she is now experiencing is NOT that ideal.
What should she conclude? How should she respond?

Some might say, "Change the ideal." We can find happiness in other ways. We can throw off the shackles of the ideal. We don't need the patriarchal family. We don't need strong and healthy marriages. We don't need the religious system laid out by God.

But this is NOT the response laid down for us in Scripture.

The biblical response declares that God is right in all his ways.
The biblical response takes responsibility for our own rebellion and turns from it.
The biblical response looks to the righteous and merciful character and work of God for restoration.
The biblical response involves enduring grief and sorrow as all things are not made right immediately.
The biblical response involves continuing to wait upon God to fix things in his time.

Even as life is NOT "happily ever after", God's people continue to hope in God to restore them to "happily ever after."

19 But
you, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.

The hope of every Christian is in the sovereign rule of God, and in particular Jesus Christ.
At the very center of the "ideal" is the rule of Jesus Christ.

How many people in our world embrace the lie that they can have the prize while casting off the rule of a Holy God?

As Christians, we embrace the opposite. We believe that before the "ideal" can ever be restored, we must first be restored to the ruler of our hearts.

20 Why do you forget us forever,
why do you forsake us for so many days?
21 Restore us to yourself, O LORD,
that we may be restored!

Renew our days as of old-
 unless you have utterly rejected us,
 and
 you remain exceedingly angry with us.

There is continued waiting. There is discouragement over the present condition of Zion.
 But there is no changing of the “ideal”.

We are to yearn for a return to the “days of old.”
 We are to love the old ideal, not attempt to design a new one.

And at the very heart of the ideal is a restoration to God himself.
 There is no restoration of “happily ever after” apart from a restoration of God to his rightful
 place in our hearts.

We need to have a restoration of our relationship with God.
 And being restored to God, the restoration of all things will come.

Our world has left this behind.
 They crave their own ideas of peace and joy and happiness.
 But they no longer think that a restoration to a right relationship with God is the core of these
 things.

So, even while you have hopes for the restoration of all things, fix your heart on your one true
 need: to be restored to God himself.

Matthew 6:33 ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all
 these things will be added to you.

John 17:3 ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus
 Christ whom you have sent.

The truth is this. Give yourself entirely to God. Seek him above all else.
 Find life in him and in knowing him.

And you can be assured that in his time he will take care of the restoration of everything else.

Romans 8:32 ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will
 he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Chase after the things apart from God, and you will have neither God nor the things.
 Seek God above the things, and you will find Him to be enough...

But because He is your one true “prince charming”, he will indeed restore to you all things.

For those who have been restored to Jesus Christ, He will indeed bring “happily ever after.”

And that is reason for joy!

The angels proclaimed it when Jesus was born into this world.

And we, even as we continue to live in world that is broken and shattered by sin, should sing it as well.

Glory to God in the Highest!