

## "LAMENTATIONS, WALK THRU THE BIBLE."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Lamentations 1:3-5; 2:17; 3:19-33

### **Introduction.**

The 66 books of the Bible are like a small library with several sections, several genres or types or kinds of literature.

We started off with the five books of the Law,. Then we had the 12 books of historical narrative from entering the Promised Land in Joshua to departing the Promised Land in exile in II Kings. Then there were the five books of Wisdom literature, practical wisdom for living and dealing with issues such as suffering, worship, common sense, despair and marriage.

Now we are in the seventeen books of the prophets, four major and 12 minor.

But tonight we come to a book tucked in the major prophets between Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Lamentations reveals another sub-genre of literature, the lament. We didn't say much about lament in the Psalms but there are at least 65 songs or psalms of lament, almost half.

Jesus said in this life you will have suffering and hardship.

Laments are a specific and specialized form of Biblical literature inspired by the Holy Spirit. The lament portions of Scripture tell us two things.

*First*, those believers who assume that their faith will keep them free from earthly troubles, trials, tragedies, heartache or suffering are wrong. The Health and Wealth Gospel is a heresy and out of touch with reality.

Jesus said in this life you will have suffering and hardship. There will be plagues, murders, thefts, suicide bombing, tsunamis, invasions, and wars. They will come to individuals and communities. No Christian can pretend great trials and calamities will not come to Christians.

There will always be times of weeping and times of rejoicing (Ecclesiastes 3:4)

*Second*, when troubles come and they will, we are not called to suffer in silence, with a stiff upper lip. The Bible teaches us how to suffer and how to lament, how to grieve though not as the rest of men who have no hope or faith.

There is a right way and a wrong way, a God-honoring way and a God-dishonoring way to react to terrible calamities.

There has never been a time or generation that didn't need this teaching. But lament has been lost from the vocabulary and prayer life of followers of Jesus today. Without it our lives become imbalanced, and lead to a crisis of faith or even an abandoning of faith.

This is why Lamentations is so essential. Here we have an entire book of Holy Scripture given to one topic, lament. God has prepared God's people to learn how to grieve and weep.

### **Book of Lamentations.**

It is written by Jeremiah which is why it is put after Jeremiah's prophecy. It is like an attached personal prayer journey where he pours out his grief for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of God's people at the hands of the Babylonians.

We have to say a little about the *structure* of Lamentations because it is very specific and unique. It is a literary masterpiece. This is a very disciplined work of art. It took great skill and careful thought to write it.

The five chapters are a collection of five laments of Jeremiah. The first four written as alphabetic acrostic poems, with each verse beginning with the 22 successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from aleph to taw. Chapters 1, 2, 4 are each 22 verse acrostics. Chapter three is a triple acrostic, 66 verses long, each three verses all beginning with the same letter. Chapter 5 is also 22 verses long, but it isn't an acrostic. Some suggest because the grief is so great it is just too hard to express it that carefully.

One of the purposes of acrostics is to suggest wholeness or completeness. These are not emotional outbursts. They are carefully crafted prayers meant to fully and completely express his emotions "from A to Z".

Perhaps the highly structured form of the acrostic is also an attempt to impose some sense of order on a tragic situation that is chaotic beyond what anyone can bear (Mitch Everingham).

### **Background, history.**

The background history of Lamentations is the same as the prophecy of Jeremiah.

The facts about the exile of Judah by Babylon are in the last chapter of II Kings, (II Kings 25) and the last chapter of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 52).

Lamentations moves beyond the facts and details, to express the emotions of the exile.

To this day the Jews traditionally mourn the destruction of Solomon's Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (BC 586) and the second Temple by the Romans (AD 70) by reading this book on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, which is August 2 this year. It is a day of fasting and mourning for Jewish people throughout the world.

This is the worst thing ever to happen in Jewish history. This is a calamity of epic proportions. The depth of the suffering and grief is hard to imagine or enter into.

Israel is homeless, destitute, utterly abandoned by God. They are evicted, exiled out of their homeland. Their temple is destroyed, which they understood to mean God had forsaken them.

Jeremiah is in pain because Judah is gone, Jerusalem is gone, the Temple is gone and the nation's leaders are dead or deported. God ripped away everything the Jews had trusted in or believed kept them safe. Everything was gone. Did that mean God was gone as well?

This is a terrible judgment, a great curse. The harshness of the judgment creates a real crisis of faith. Why would God do this to His people?

### **Purpose, theme**

Lamentations is an expression of God's gracious purposes to give us help and direction in response to the tragedies that God allows and ordains to come into our lives.

There is a proper way and an improper way to weep, to grieve, to lament. Lamentation gives our grieving souls a vocabulary for expressing ourselves in honest prayer to God.

Here is language to express grief over the consequences of sin, in our world, in our community, in our church, in our homes, in our hearts. Grief over the destruction, all that has been lost and taken by sin and evil.

**There are at least four lessons we can learn.**

*First, calamity has come.*

**Lamentations 1:1** 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.

The city weeps and mourns, the priests groan, the maidens grieve, the enemies laugh. They are destitute, broken, impoverished, starving. The greatest heartache is to see the suffering of the infants and children (2:11-12).

Israel was a theocracy, God was her king, she was God's kingdom. She had stood for a thousand years against every attack and every enemy.

How?! How could this have happened?

This is one of the most tragic books in the Bible. Israel was God's people. She was the glory of the living God.

This was the nation from which would come salvation and blessing for all the families of the earth. How vile and wicked and polluted and idolatrous and treasonous must she have become to be judged so harshly and laid to waste so completely.

***Second, sin has caused it.***

Why all the suffering? Why all the calamity? Who is responsible, who is to blame? They humbly acknowledge that the problem is not their God, but their sin.

Lam 1:5 The Lord has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions;

Lam 1:8 Jerusalem sinned grievously; therefore she became filthy. The Lord is in the right,

Lam 4:13 This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests.

God sends judgment on His people because of the multitude of their sins and their sinful rebellion, disobedience, idolatry. Not just one sin or a few sins or a lot of sins, but 900 years of sin back to Moses, or 1400 years of sin back to Abraham.

Never once has God ever been unfair or mistreated one of His own. Whatever judgment or discipline any one of His children has received from His hand, it was far less than he deserved.

In any time of great calamity, it is essential to examine our hearts and lay our souls bare before God. Suffering can be a messenger from God, leading us to confession and repentance. Our sins are so many, we have so many idols, we have so much doubt and lack of faith, so much selfishness.

In our suffering God wants our undivided attention. He humbles us and calls us to examine our hearts and see if there be any sinful way in us.

***Third, God has ordained it.***

Lam 1:5 The Lord has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions;

Lam 3:1-7 I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath;

2 He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light;

3 Surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long.

4 He has made my flesh and my skin waste away; he has broken my bones;

5 He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation;

6 He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.

We are reminded of the sovereignty of God in the sufferings of His people. Whoever might be the instrument of judgment, they can only do what the Lord has determined.

Lam 2:17 The Lord has done what he purposed; he has carried out his word, which he commanded long ago; he has thrown down without pity.

There could be no doubt that the curses that God announced ahead of time if the covenant was broken, would come when the demands of the covenant were disobeyed. Covenant judgment was deeply engraved into the Law and the hearts and minds of God's people.

God is righteous judge. God is actively involved in ruling our universe. God is not distant and passive.

***Fourth, there is hope nevertheless.***

Yes God is absolutely sovereign and it is God's sovereignty that is the grounds for hope. The Lord takes away and the Lord gives. God's direct involvement in their suffering, is the seed of hope.

God's love tempers His wrath, His compassions always accompany His judgment.

The message of hope reaches a crescendo in the center chapter, the pinnacle chapter of Lamentations. At the heart of the book, the center of the book and the longest chapter, is the hope in God.

**Lamentations 3:24** The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him.

Even if the sacred city and holy temple are destroyed, even if the whole land is taken away, yet nothing can take away the Lord. He is still God and He is still their God. He is their portion forever, and that is cause for hope.

Lam 3:31-33 For the Lord will not cast off forever,

32 but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;  
33 for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.

Chapter three is one of the most beautiful passages in all the Bible. It reveals the compassion of the heart of God. We see

First, His covenant love (3:22, 32)

Second, His covenant faithfulness (23)

Third, His goodness (25)

God has an unswerving commitment to redeem a people for Himself. God can be counted on to accomplish His ultimate goal of salvation. God in Christ is our final hope.

## **Jesus**

As Jeremiah wept over Jerusalem, so Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

**Matthew 23:37** “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

The new covenant curses of God were fulfilled when God heap all the sin and guilt of His people on His only beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus cried out the greatest lament ever spoken, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Not until the advent of Jesus Christ do we find the full resolution of the questions posed by this book.

Jesus is our eternal hope. In this life we will have affliction and trouble. In this life we will suffer, even as He did. But because God is sovereign over all things, that suffering can never be meaningless or purposeless leading to despair. It is always redemptive, sanctifying, disciplining.

And our eternal hope is secure. God will never leave us or forsake us.

## **Implications and application.**

Lamentations provides a framework for godly mourning and repentance. *Learn to grieve.* Take time to express the sadness of your soul. Don't feel like you have to move on too quickly. We don't have to cover up our grief with being strong all the time and always saying we are fine.

five key elements: address your complaint to God, a description of suffering (vv.1-18), a plea for relief (vv.v.59), an expression of trust (vv.21-36), a certainty of being heard (vv.55-63)

Lamentations not only validates lament as a permissible emotional expression but demonstrates that it is a means to seek God's face in life's darkest moments.

Eccls 7:2 It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.

### ***Learn from grief.***

God teaches through sorrow that otherwise would never have been learned.

The book is designed to teach us through what might be called the therapy of trouble, what sorrow teaches us. All through scripture we are told that pain and suffering are God's instruments by which he teaches us. Through suffering comes strength of character. Do not be surprised that this is true. We read in Hebrews of the Lord Jesus, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." (Hebrews 5:8)

C.S. Lewis famously wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." God communicates in different ways, with pain being the most forceful and attention-grabbing form of his communication.

### **Along the Road**

"I walked a mile with Pleasure;  
She chatted all the way;  
But left me none the wiser  
For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow;  
And ne'er a word said she;  
But, oh! The things I learned from her,  
When Sorrow walked with me."

— Robert Browning Hamilton

Let Lamentations guide you in your expression of pain, sorry, anger, regret, or grief.  
Let Lamentations teach you the kindness and the severity of God (as Romans 11 puts it).  
Let Lamentations show you the horrific consequences of sin and rebellion against God.

Let Lamentations point you directly to the God who will not cast off forever. Whose mercies are new every morning. And whose love and faithfulness are very great indeed (Matt Heerema).

Lam 3:21-22 But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;

**Prayer:** Holy Father, thank you that in your wisdom and knowing what we need, you inspired the Book of Lamentations. Thank you for Jeremiah's faithfulness, honesty, integrity and humanity. Teach us to learn the truth about suffering and how you never leave us or forsake us, how you hold us up and carry us in the darkest hours.