

Lamentations: The Volatile Voice of Grief

A Voice We Need To Hear

by Whitney Woollard

Lamentations isn't a "feel-good" book. Actually, it's a total downer. It's a collection of five lament or "funeral" poems (poems of sorrow and mourning) that give voice to the grief of God's people in the wake of Jerusalem's fall and Judah's demise in 587 B.C.E. The book mourns the day, warned of by the prophets, when God became like an enemy to Israel, giving them over to Babylon because of their chronic disregard for his covenant. Second Kings 24-25 and Jeremiah 52 give you the facts; Lamentations gives you the emotions, emotions that are raw, honest, dark, and even volatile at times. That's why this is the book of grief in the Bible.

It will come as no surprise then that Lamentations is also one of the most neglected books of the Bible. We—particularly us modern Westerners—are uncomfortable with grief, suffering, and emotions of this magnitude. We don't know what to do when faced with it, so we don't do anything at all. This is unfortunate because Lamentations is a powerful voice we must hear for many reasons, three of which we'll explore below.

Lamentations Memorializes Israel's Grief

The fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple was the greatest catastrophe in Israel's history. After years of unrepentant idolatry, political foolishness, and social oppression, the hammer of God's wrath fell upon his people bringing unspeakable devastation to every level of human experience—psychological, physical, spiritual, relational, and emotional. Everything Israel believed was irrevocably theirs—the city of Zion, the Davidic throne, Yahweh's temple, and the promised land—was lost. All of it, gone up in flames.

What now? Where does Israel go from here? The only conceivable starting place is lament, which is what our anonymous author sets out to do in these five tear-soaked poems. He takes us on a journey through Israel's grief by a masterful use of Hebrew poetry, forcing us to see and consider the horrors of what took place.

Consider the structure. It doesn't show up in our English translations, but the first four poems are acrostics. These are Hebrew alphabet poems where every line/verse begins with the next letter of the alphabet. It's like the author is spelling out Israel's suffering from A to Z. No stone is left unturned as he gives full vent to their grief. Yet the acrostics also serve to bring some sense of order and restraint, adding a gentle dignity to what would otherwise have become chaotic, dehumanizing displays of grief.

There's also brilliant use of personification. Jerusalem is depicted as "Lady Zion," a widowed, childless, vulnerable woman who endured rape, exploitation, affliction, and starvation during the siege and capture of the city. The narrator and Lady Zion begin to "dialogue" in chapter one, allowing us to hear her express her pain. She cries to all who pass by her, looking for comfort amidst her affliction, though none is found. She weeps with sorrow, her strength fails, she's in distress, she groans continually, she cries to God, all to no avail. You can't help but be moved by her pain and shame, even if it was the result of her sin.

Another powerful rhetorical device is the author's use of contrasts: male and female, bitter and repentant, individual and corporate, protesting and prophetic, hopeless and hopeful, rich and poor, young and old. It not only conveys the totality of God's judgment on all, it also gives total expression to the nature of grief. In one moment there's outrage and bewilderment at God's judgments, and in the next there's admission of moral culpability. The narrator wanders from sadness to anger to disbelief to hope and then back to sadness. He's bitter and then repentant and then bitter again. We see that suffering is never neat and tidy. It's not always linear, and it's definitely not pretty.

There's no doubt that reading Lamentations is painful, but it's important we remember that unique moment in history where God's people were swept away in the tidal wave of his judgment and memorialized their grief accordingly. As Christopher Wright comments, "Part of the horror of human suffering is to be unheard, forgotten and nameless, thrown aside ... Lamentations is a summons to remember realities endured by real people like ourselves, to bear witness and pay heed to their voice" (*The Message of Lamentations*). Let's pay attention to their voices, and when we've heard them, let's consider how they shape our own.

Lamentations Gives Voice to Our Grief

Although we can't draw a one-to-one application from Israel's circumstances to ours, Lamentations can teach us to hear and speak the biblical language of lament, which is crucial to dealing with grief. Lament allows us to fully face and name our pain, and it creates space for future resolution and hope without glossing over our trauma. It gives us permission to protest life's difficulties, to scream, cry, vent, plead, and complain in the presence of God and others. It lets us ask the hard questions without condemnation: Why did this have to happen? How could you allow it? Where are you in the midst of it? It allows weeping without explanation. It might be messy and uncomfortable, but it's the first step towards healing.

We could benefit from incorporating both the individual and corporate elements of lament into our lives. For example, if you feel alone, forsaken, or abandoned by God, give honest expression to those feelings. If you're exhausted by life's blows, having lost all endurance or the will to go on, tell it to God. Really. The Bible wants you to do this.

"My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness (Hebrew: "good") is; so I say 'My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD.'" Lamentations 3:17-18

If you're not used to this kind of raw honesty in God's presence, it might seem scary at first. That's okay. Just know that lament isn't irreverent; it's biblical. Going to God in your grief is an act of faith all on its own.

Chapter five then moves us from the individual laments to the corporate cry of God's people. Together they plead.

"Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look and see our disgrace." Lamentations 5:1

They tell him how their hearts have grown sick with mourning and their eyes dim with grief. They recount their sufferings to God, pleading with him to intervene. That's a pretty honest crew, huh? The contemporary church could learn from this. Incorporating prayers of lament into a Christian worship

service or small gatherings is a way to give voice to hurting believers. It says, “We see you and we grieve alongside you.” (Remember, Lady Zion’s plea was for people to see her pain.)

Corporate lament also provides the space for us to identify with and grieve over all the suffering in the world, especially the sufferings of our brothers and sisters who have experienced loss of land, homes, families, livelihood, food, dignity, and humanity. In a global village where disasters, wars, shootings, and famines are brought before our eyes daily, it’s natural that we should weep with one another by sharing in the God-given language of lament and crying out “How? Why?” alongside them.

Lament then, is a powerful practice that gives voice to our grief and initiates the healing process, but Lamentations doesn’t stop there. If it did, our grief would swallow us whole. Grief of this magnitude is simply too much to bear, which is why God gives us hope in Lamentations that one day “the man who has seen affliction” (Lam. 3:1) would bear the grief we’re unable to.

Lamentations Points to Jesus, the Ultimate Grief-Bearer

Despite its inconsolable suffering, Lamentations does offer us hope, first in the immediate text and then in the context of the whole Bible. Explicit words of hope are found at the center of the book in Lamentations 3:21-25. The man is able to hope because he calls to mind the nature of his covenantal God and remembers that he is ultimately a God of love, compassion, and faithfulness. He then resolves to seek Yahweh and wait on his salvation even when Yahweh is (seemingly) nowhere to be found. Yet the ending of the book leaves much to be desired in terms of salvation. The last words on Israel’s lips are, “Restore us to yourself, O LORD...unless you have utterly rejected us...” (Lam. 5:21-22).

Good thing these aren’t the last words of the Bible! If we zoom out to the context of the whole Bible, we see that Lamentations actually anticipates Jesus’ sin/grief-bearing work on the cross. It speaks of a suffering that is borne by one on behalf of the many (Lamentations 3:49-66). The man in chapter three, a personification of the collective whole, takes upon himself the sufferings of Judah, bearing witness to their pain. You can’t help but notice the striking resemblance to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, who also identifies as Israel and then stands in Israel’s place to bear their suffering. These Old Testament texts provide the paradigm for the coming of Jesus, who would come as the true Israel of God to stand in the place of many and take the burden of sin and sorrow upon himself, so that humanity might be reconciled to God.

When we read Lamentations in light of Jesus’ identification with Israel, we start to see how it (particularly Lady Zion and “the man”) foreshadows his sin-bearing work. Like Lady Zion, Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Like her, he suffered abandonment from his closest friends, ridicule from his enemies, and apathy from those passing by. He too, was stripped naked, publicly shamed and exposed. And no one was there to comfort him, not even his God. Like Lady Zion, he became unclean, defiled by sin (though not his own) in order to be sin for us. Like the man, Jesus “felt the blows of a rod, the tearing of his flesh, the impotence of an inescapable ‘prison’ on the cross, piercing, mockery, bitterness, and gall. Like the Man, too, however, Christ could and did entrust himself to the God of ultimate faithfulness and compassion, knowing that he would not be ‘cast off forever’.” (Christopher Wright, *The Message of Lamentations*).

The echoes are startling. Much of what we recoil at in Lamentations—the level of debasement, the humiliation, the judgment of God—are little pictures of what Jesus would suffer as he bore the sins of the

world. This includes our sin and suffering. That alone is reason enough to read Lamentations. We need to linger over these horrifying images long enough to appreciate the depth of Jesus' grief-bearing work.

A Final Word on Grief: There's Always Hope

Those of us who are united to Jesus through faith and repentance may face incalculable grief in this lifetime, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. We know that all of our grief, sorrow, and sin has been borne by another for us. Through Jesus, we not only experience salvation amidst sorrow, but we also have great confidence that one day all of our sorrow will be wiped away when Jesus returns to right all wrongs and cause us to walk with God in unbroken fellowship on a fully renewed earth. This doesn't mean you should gloss over your pain; it just means there's always hope.