

SEEING OUR SUFFERING

SERIES: LAMENTATIONS: THERE
MAY YET BE HOPE



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Lamentations 2
Second Message
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Lamentations 2

Last week we began a series in Lamentations. Pastor Felicia Larson did a great job of leading us into our first reflection on chapter 1. She pointed something out that became one of the big ideas that we wrestled with as a group of pastors studying this book.

Last year at this time, we studied the book of Job. Job is a book about an individual suffering something he did not deserve.

Lamentations is different. This is not a book about an individual. Instead, it's a book about a community. An entire nation is suffering something that they did deserve—a group of people going through something together.

That situation is really hard for us to grasp. We hardly know how to lament at all. But how do we lament together as a community?

Several of my children have read the famous story of Romeo and Juliet over the last few years. I think this story illustrates why it's so hard for us to think about lamenting together. The basic plot is about forbidden love. Romeo is part of the Montague family, and Juliet is a Capulet. The Montagues and the Capulets are at war.

Why should their family connection interfere with their love for each other? That's the central question. Family allegiance is presented as outdated and irrelevant to the passionate love shared by two individuals. This play, among other things, is a story about the conflict between the individual and the group. And the individual wins, hands down.

We live in a hyper-individualistic culture. Last week during the post-sermon Q&A, someone asked Felicia Larson about the idea of repenting for the sins of our group. They said, "I can only speak for myself, right?" That's a product of our individualistic mindset. The problem is not that we don't know how to repent as a community. The problem is that we don't really know how to do anything as a community.

Maybe that's where a book like Lamentations could help us. Maybe we can start by learning to lament together. Perhaps that can open up the door to seeing ourselves as more of a group. This morning we're going to hear the author describing a scene of immense, horrific suffering. My hope is that by hearing how he laments his community's suffering, we can learn to do the same. We can learn about seeing our suffering.

We have a unique opportunity right now. We are joining with other churches now to preach through the book of Lamentations. We're doing this as a community. I listened to Pastor Kaloma Smith's sermon from last week, and he pointed out that we are all in this together. We have black pastors, Asian pastors, and white pastors teaching through this book. We have a black church, a Chinese church, and two multi-ethnic churches, and we're all experiencing the same thing. We're all going through a pandemic together.

As we look at today's passage, we'll see how that doesn't mean we're all equally affected by this trauma. But it is something we are feeling together.

Shared trauma draws us together. My hope is that this poem in Lamentations 2 can help us to see the suffering that we share and draw us together as one.

Throughout this chapter, one word keeps reappearing. We're going to use that word to guide our study. It's the word "pour." First, we'll see how God's wrath is "poured out." Then we'll see how the lives of individuals are "poured out." Finally, we'll hear an invitation to take up all that pain and "pour out" our hearts to God.

It's a simple flow—first, the suffering of the many. Then the suffering of the individuals. Finally, an invitation to offer our lament up to God.

Our communal pain

The first four chapters of Lamentations are acrostic poems. Each verse starts with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order: A, B, C, etc. One of the effects of this is emphasizing the total and complete destruction that has occurred.

That will become obvious as we start by reading the first few verses.

Lamentations 2:1-5:

**How the Lord in his anger
has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud!
He has cast down from heaven to earth
the splendor of Israel;
he has not remembered his footstool
in the day of his anger.**

**2 The Lord has swallowed up without mercy
all the habitations of Jacob;
in his wrath he has broken down
the strongholds of the daughter of Judah;
he has brought down to the ground in
dishonor
the kingdom and its rulers.**

**3 He has cut down in fierce anger
all the might of Israel;
he has withdrawn from them his right hand
in the face of the enemy;
he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob,
consuming all around.**

**4 He has bent his bow like an enemy,
with his right hand set like a foe;
and he has killed all who were delightful in
our eyes
in the tent of the daughter of Zion;
he has poured out his fury like fire.**

**5 The Lord has become like an enemy;
he has swallowed up Israel;
he has swallowed up all its palaces;
he has laid in ruins its strongholds,
and he has multiplied in the daughter of
Judah
mourning and lamentation.**

The beginning of chapter two reads like a thesaurus for the word “destroy.” Hurling down, swallowed up, torn down, cut off, strung his bow, burned, slain. It just goes on and on. There are words of destruction at the hands of God 28 times in the first eight verses. 28 times.

Notice how our word “pour” shows up: “He has poured out his fury like fire.” God has brought complete destruction to his people. Of course, this was predicted in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. This destruction only came after centuries of warnings. But for the people who lived through this, it was devastating.

How do you process the fact that God has brought such total destruction to his own people?

What about us? How do we process the kind of devastation that we’ve experienced? How do you grieve and mourn and move past and pick up the pieces? It’s starting to seem that things are picking up again. All of a sudden, we have youth sports and appointments and all sorts of things on our calendar.

But you can’t just go back to normal, not after the kind of year we’ve had. It’s when the trauma lifts that you really start to get a sense of the breadth of the devastation. During the battle, you’re fighting for your life. It’s afterwards, as you walk through the burned-out city, that you really see everything that happened.

Why does the author go on and on about destruction? Why so many words that mean the same thing? Because he wants the reader to see—to really see the scope of all that has happened. He wants us to see their pain.

These verses show us the value of brutal honesty in the midst of pain. They also give us a picture of doing it together, realizing that this is a shared experience of trauma. There is value to see our suffering.

I know some of you are doing great. Shelter-in-place has been good for you. Your job is fine, and you don’t have to commute anymore. Some of you are thriving in this season. But here’s my invitation: even if you’re doing okay, lament at our suffering.

Lament for all of us that aren’t doing great. Lament for those who lost family members, and jobs, and homes. Lament for the wave after wave of crisis that has hit our country and world in the last year. What do you see when you look around you?

Do you see the suffering of others? Or do you see our collective suffering? Do you see that we suffer together?

I’m not trying to make you feel guilty if you’re doing fine while others of us are suffering. In fact, feeling bad about doing well is just another distraction from really seeing others suffering. That keeps the attention on you. It’s not about you. Don’t feel bad that you’re doing well. That helps no one. Just grieve the pain that others are feeling. Lament our suffering together.

Here’s how the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

To do this well, we need to know how the rest of the body is suffering. We need to hear the individual stories of pain so that we can lament them together. That's precisely where the poem heads next.

Pour out individual pain

The first ten verses of this chapter list the various aspects of God's judgment on the city. They are written from the perspective of a narrator. But in verse 11, things get personal. The author, Jeremiah, speaks up from his point of view. The effect of this is to zoom in from the grand scale of the devastation to a more individual level.

Lamentations 2:11-13:

**My eyes are spent with weeping;
my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out to the ground
because of the destruction of the daughter
of my people,
because infants and babies faint
in the streets of the city.**

**12 They cry to their mothers,
“Where is bread and wine?”
as they faint like a wounded man
in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out
on their mothers' bosom.**

**13 What can I say for you, to what compare
you,
O daughter of Jerusalem?
What can I liken to you, that I may comfort
you,
O virgin daughter of Zion?
For your ruin is vast as the sea;
who can heal you?**

This is such a horrific image. Here there are two occurrences of the word “pour.” First, Jeremiah is watching a gruesome scene and says that “his bile is poured out.” The literal words are “my liver is poured out.” Most translations render this “heart,” recognizing that the stomach was seen as the seat of the emotions.

I think it might be more literal than that. I think Jeremiah is vomiting because of the horror of what he's seeing. He is literally sick to his stomach. Why?

Because infants are dying in his city. He says, “their life is poured out on their mothers' bosom.” Mothers are holding their children in their arms as they die from

hunger and thirst because of the siege of Jerusalem. Nothing can be done.

After 28 words describing the destruction of everything, the poem zooms in on one scene—Jeremiah vomiting as he watches an infant starve to death in the arms of its mother.

This is the kind of suffering that sin produces. Sin doesn't affect everyone equally. Sin doesn't act fairly. In this world, suffering is rarely targeted on the ones who most deserve it. It's often the opposite. Often it is the most vulnerable and the least powerful who suffer the most.

To see our shared suffering, you need to see how others are suffering. Whenever a tragedy happens, it's usually the vulnerable who suffer the most. We are all so isolated because of this pandemic. But we can't use that as an excuse to insulate ourselves from the stories of pain that are out there. We need to see the suffering of the vulnerable.

This is what we've seen over the last year. The COVID-19 pandemic has not struck our country equally. The CDC reports that native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos are roughly twice as likely to die from COVID-19 than whites and Asian Americans.¹

On the one hand, we have all gone through this pandemic together. But each of our experiences has been very different. Even in my family, one of my children has had her freshman year of college impacted and one his junior year of high school. Those are different losses.

Single parents have suffered something different from single young adults. It's different for empty nesters than for parents of preschoolers. White-collar and blue-collar. We've all experienced this global pandemic, but each of our pain has been unique. It's the vulnerable who have suffered the most.

I'm struck at how Jeremiah engages with this pain. He didn't have to watch that infant die in her mother's arms. He could have insulated himself. We find out in Jeremiah 40 that the Babylonian captain of the guard offered to bring Jeremiah to Babylon and give him a safe position. He could have escaped all this pain.

Instead, here he is, vomiting in the streets. Are you willing to see others' suffering so intensely that it makes you sick?

Last week on the Q&A call following our service, one of our older saints spoke up at the end. She spoke directly to Felicia Larson and said something along these lines, “I’ve been watching the new show on PBS called The Black Church. And I just want to say, as a white woman to a black woman, thank you. Christianity in America owes a debt of gratitude to the Black Church for persevering through so much suffering. We need you.”

Friends, that’s what we’re talking about. Can you see the suffering of others, particularly the vulnerable? Can you make it your own?

Pour out to God

Our chapter began with a high level but comprehensive catalog of destruction. We saw the suffering of the many. Our suffering. Then it moved into a more personal encounter with human suffering. We saw the suffering of the individual, especially the vulnerable. The poem concludes with instructions on what to do with that suffering. We’re going to read verses 19-22, and I want you to notice how many instructions are given in these final verses.

Lamentations 2:19-22:

**“Arise, cry out in the night,
at the beginning of the night watches!
Pour out your heart like water
before the presence of the Lord!
Lift your hands to him
for the lives of your children,
who faint for hunger
at the head of every street.”**

**20 Look, O Lord, and see!
With whom have you dealt thus?
Should women eat the fruit of their womb,
the children of their tender care?
Should priest and prophet be killed
in the sanctuary of the Lord?**

**21 In the dust of the streets
lie the young and the old;
my young women and my young men
have fallen by the sword;
you have killed them in the day of your
anger,
slaughtering without pity.
22 You summoned as if to a festival day
my terrors on every side,
and on the day of the anger of the Lord
no one escaped or survived;**

those whom I held and raised my enemy destroyed.

In these verses, we see two different sets of requests. The first is a set of instructions to the people who are suffering and in pain. The second is a direct cry to God.

Verse 19 has four different instructions for those who suffer. Arise. Cry out. Pour out your heart. Lift your hands to him. There’s our word again: “pour out your heart like water.” We began hearing how God’s fury was poured out. Then we saw how Jeremiah’s bile was poured out because the lives of infants were being poured out. Now the reader is given an instruction to “pour our your heart.”

That’s a pretty good summary of what it means to lament. Pour out your heart. Arise, cry out, lift up your hands and pour out your heart like water to God! But notice what you are asking God to do.

Verse 20 says, “Look, O LORD, and consider!” Look at me. See my pain. Notice what I’m going through.

When my kids were little, my wife and I would take them to the park. Sometimes they’d fall or get hurt. What’s the first thing they would do? Run to my wife or me to show us their injury. Actually, they’d usually run to my wife because she’d have more compassion for them. They were hurt, and they wanted it to be noticed.

One of the most striking things about the book of Lamentations is what isn’t there. The author doesn’t say to ask God to make the pain stop. He invites us to ask God to notice us. Throughout the book of Lamentations, there are no requests for God to ease their suffering. Stop and think about that. Nowhere in five chapters of poetic acrostic does the author say, “please make the pain stop.”

In fact, there are 15 imperatives directed to God in the entire book. Fifteen requests. Eleven of those are some form of this same request: look or see or remember. When we are hurting, the first thing we want is for God to see our pain.

Look for our suffering. Look at the suffering of the vulnerable. Then pour out your heart to God.

Most of us like to fix things. We want to contribute to the world. We want to make peoples’ lives better. And there is plenty of opportunities to do just that. As Pastor Jeff Louie preached a few weeks ago, God gives us the incredible privilege to contribute to his eternal work. It’s amazing.

When we or others are in pain, the first thing to do is simply to name it. Usually, we jump too quickly to fixing. We want to fix our own lives. We manipulate the situation, optimize for our comfort, or avoid the pain. And when those close to us are suffering, we jump in to rescue them.

I want to invite you to lay aside that part of you desperate for a fix. Don't ask God for a solution. The city has been burned. The temple has been destroyed. The people have been displaced. There is no fix for that. There is no solution.

Lament is not an idea. It's not something you learn from a sermon. Lament is something you do. As we preach this book, we are inviting you to do something. What if you actually did this? Arise. Cry out. Pour out your heart. Lift up your hands. See our suffering. See the suffering of the vulnerable.

Take some time this week to pour out your heart. Make a list of all that you've lost this past year and bring it to God. Listen to the stories of what others have lost and lament it as your own suffering. Something powerful happens when you pour out your heart to God. I can't tell you what will come of it, but I know that God will meet you there.

That's always our goal as we preach the word of God to you. Not that you understand something, but that you engage with God more deeply. Find a way this week to tell God what you've lost.

The only thing worse than suffering is when nobody knows what you're going through. You feel invisible. Unimportant. Forgotten. When you find yourself in that place, you need to know that God sees. You can pour out your heart to God because he sees.

God has not forgotten you. God has not forgotten this world. God has not forgotten the vulnerable communities which this pandemic has hit the hardest. God sees. He sees. God sees our pain.

Take some time, find a quiet place, and pour out your heart to God.

Conclusion

We have a hard time thinking of ourselves as a group. So much of our culture emphasizes our individuality. But we are part of a body. If we're going to learn to be the body of Christ, maybe lamenting together is a good start.

The act of lament helps us to process our collective pain. When we ask God to see what we're going through, something good happens.

Because as always, it all comes back to Jesus. The reason my kids wanted us to see their hurt knees was because they knew our character. They knew that they would receive comfort. Even today, when something difficult happens, I know that if I call my mother, she'll make a fuss over me.

The reason we want God to see our pain is that we know who he is. We want him to see it because we know he'll act. Jeremiah asks a horrific question: "Should women eat their offspring, the children they have borne?" He has the courage to ask this question because he knows how his God will answer.

We know how our God responds to injustice because we have seen it in Jesus Christ. We know he will act to alleviate our suffering because he sacrificed everything to make us part of his family. This is why "there may yet be hope." We always suffer in hope because of the gospel.

We have sometimes talked about Jesus as our "personal Lord and Savior." And he is. But in Colossians 1:18, the apostle Paul describes Jesus as "the head of the body, the church." Jesus is our Lord. He is our Savior.

So it's appropriate today to wrap up this sermon by leading into the Lord's Table. We call this celebration Communion because it is a group activity. This is not just about me remembering the sacrifice Jesus made. It's about us remembering the sacrifice Jesus made.

That's why when the apostle Paul addressed the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11, he was horrified that this celebration had actually created division instead of healing it. He said in verses 17-18, "But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you." He then goes so far to say in verse 20, "it is not the Lord's supper that you eat."

Jesus died to create a community that worships together, celebrates together and laments together. So while we are physically distant, we are connected by our shared celebration of the trauma that Jesus Christ experienced on our behalf.

Endnotes

- 1 "Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death By Race/Ethnicity," CDC, accessed February 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>.

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