

Title: Things we don't talk about
Text: Lamentations 1
Theme: Why we need to lament
Series: Lamentations #1
Prop Stmt: God put Lamentations in the Bible because we need it.

Lamentations is a series of poetic laments which are the anguished cries of one's heart attempting to make sense of the utter devastation of the city of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. God, did it have to be like this?

Read Text: Lamentations 1.1-12

"Hey, (Lydia, the precocious 6-year-old asks at the family reunion) whatever happened to uncle Mike?" The frozen faces and awkward silence is only broken when Aunt Cindy says, "Does anyone want some more potato salad?" In that moment, little Lydia has learned. There are just certain things that we do not talk about it. We don't talk about uncle Mike. She doesn't know why, but she knows that there are some things we don't talk about. Is that true of your family? It was true of mine and that is true of just about every relational construct like work, or school or a neighborhood, even a church. Why don't we talk about it? Why are there some things that we do not discuss? Well, it is not appropriate. It may make someone feel bad. We do not want anyone to feel uncomfortable. But, is that right and, is it actually good? How do we really know what we should or should not talk about?

This morning, I am starting a series from the book of Lamentations. I have felt impressed to do this series, though I confess I approach it with an overwhelming sense of inadequacy. Preaching itself is an exercise of inadequacy. The message is always so much more important than the messenger. Not only that, but the messenger never lives up to the message. But, preaching on a text and a subject that is even farther outside of your comfort zone is hard; hard but necessary. There are many books of the Bible that I could preach through and most of you would have a sense of why I am doing it. But, there are probably some of you who did not even know that there was a book in the Bible called Lamentations and if you did, you may not have ever read it, or have ever heard a sermon from it, much less a series. So, why? Why am I preaching a series from the book of Lamentations? This morning, I aim to answer that and therefore, prepare you for this series. I think we need preparation.

1. Why Lamentations?

A. It is in the Bible

God knows what we need better than we do. There are two fundamental approaches to preaching. 1) Let the audience determine the topic or 2) Let God pick the topic. Let me give you an example. I was listening to a man explain different ways you can attract more people to church. One of his main points was; life is hard. People have tough things going on all week long. When they come to church, they need relief from those tough things. Church needs to be an oasis, a break, a happy place. People should go home lighter than when they came. If that is your vision of the church and you are the preacher or leader, then you will pick preaching topics and

music styles to accomplish that goal. You will gauge the audience for what resonates best with them. Most of the time, people do not want to deal with heavy stuff. It's tough. It's hard. It takes spiritual, mental, emotional and relational investment and quite frankly, most people just don't want to make that kind of investment. They don't want to go deep. So, if you want people to associate a good feeling with church, then keep it light and airy and easy on the palate. You don't have to chew cotton candy like steak. And since books like Lamentations are not light, happy and frivolous, they are rarely addressed in church but, at what cost? What kind of happiness is it when it comes at the expense of truth?

If you only talk about things that make people happy for a moment you send this message: "in our church we really don't deal with heavy issues." Why not? Either we think you can't handle it, or God cannot really help you with the weighty matters of life. So, you get cotton candy. But, you cannot run a marathon on cotton candy. You need carbs and protein. You cannot persevere in the faith, you cannot finish strong, you cannot make it home before the dark without going nose to nose, eye to eye with the hard issues of life, like death, suffering, suicide, assault, loss, disease, guilt, shame, injustice, punishment, grief and God.

God put this book in the Bible because he knows that we need it. We need the book of Lamentations. Lamentations is part of what Paul had in mind when he wrote 2 Timothy 3.16-17. It is profitable and needful for us to be like Jesus – 2 Timothy 3.16-17 (more on that in a bit).

Another reason why I am preaching through Lamentations is because:

B. Our culture is really bad at lamenting.

Our affluence is a gift, but it can also be a curse. Part of the curse of affluence is that we can get the wrong idea that sorrow and lament are the exceptions to life instead of the rule. We are surprised by grief, when we should be surprised that we are surprised by grief. Our view of life needs to take theology seriously. We live east of Eden. We live in a world that is cursed by sin. Life as we know it, is not life as it should be.

Walking through the ruins of a once great civilization...

We live amongst the ruins that tell us of a time when things were different. But since we have more comforts than any king or queen of ages past, and more medical advances than any civilization could have dreamed of, we think that we can or should eradicate all pain. We don't know what to do with pain. We do not know what to do with sorrow or loss. In fact, we are so bad at lamenting that when someone laments, they are made to feel as if something is wrong with them. When you read some of the Psalms of lament, or especially, when you read the book of Lamentations, you may conclude that the writer was depressed as if depression is unusual. We live in a sin-cursed world where evil appears to have the upper hand. If the circumstances of your life are discouraging, and you get discouraged, it does not mean that your response is wrong. If you didn't get discouraged, you would be denying reality. But we get that message from our world. If you lament, you need to fix it and get some therapy. Or you need to mask it and take some pills, or numb it with some alcohol, or escape from it with entertainment or diversions. Or deny it by not talking about it, refusing to think about it, or staying away from all reminders of it.

The expectation is, “hurry up and get over it.” Your grief makes others uncomfortable. You are ruining their life. Therefore, you learn quickly that if you lament too much, you will be punished. You will be isolated. We’ve talked about the curse of social media that is part of a greater plague. Because your world is not good at reality, it creates a false image for you to live up to. You can’t live up to it. You cannot be what you think your world wants. The level of anxiety that many high school and college age girls live with is incredible. Google the statistics and you will see that the percentage of girls on anti-depressants is staggering. Why are so many people medicated? We don’t think we are supposed to suffer and when we do, we don’t know what to do with it.

C. Our western Christianity is too shallow to handle it.

The church bought the lie that people do not need doctrine. They do not need robust theology or expositional preaching. They need the practical stuff. They need a reason to get up on Monday morning and manage their money a little better. And while the millennials are mocked for being the snowflake generation that melts away as soon as there is a little heat, the truth is, this is what much of the Christian church looks like. We are shallow. Psalms of lament are not considered suitable for public worship because they are downers.

Do you remember this line in the Princess Bride? “*Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.*” Westley, in Princess Bride

Do you know what is embarrassing? There is more wisdom in the fictitious Westley than in Joel Osteen. And we’ve bought into the notion that we are supposed to have our best life now. So, why lamentations? We need it. We need to learn what lament is, and we need to learn how to practice it and how to love others well who are in it.

Nancy Duff said, “*Psalms of lament allow us to speak from the darkest regions of the heart, where our despair threatens to overwhelm us. In so speaking we do not exhibit a lack of faith, but stand in a biblical tradition that recognizes that no part of life, including the most hideous and painful parts, is to be withheld from God, who loves us, who in Jesus Christ speaks the psalms of lament alongside us, and who proclaims hope, when there can – at least for the time being – be no hope in us.*”

2. What do I hope to accomplish with this series?

A. Know and love God and his Word more.

God reveals himself through his Word and through all of his Word. To ignore a portion of God’s Word is to ignore a part of God. But, when I say I want you to know his Word, I mean more than being informed as to the content of it. I want you to feel this text. If you don’t feel this text, then you do not know this text. If you don’t feel this text then you will not know God as you should. If you don’t know God as you should, you won’t know yourself as you should and you won’t love God or others as you could.

B. Point you to Jesus.

How does Lamentations point to Jesus? Lamentations is a collection of laments. These are the outpourings of a broken heart and seemingly ruined life that is crushed by devastation and is not getting over it. Are you and I going to run from this book and from the writer? Are we going to isolate him, stay away from him, ignore his pain, when God directed him to write his anguish and his hard thoughts about God? Jesus does not do that to us. When Mary and Martha's brother died, Jesus came and he wept! Jesus wept (John 11.35). We are to weep with those who weep because Jesus does. He feels our infirmities. He carries our burdens. He bears our sorrows. Our Redeemer, our King, our Savior is also our Priest who stands on our behalf, with our names on his hand before the Father. Jesus is comfortable with the uncomfortable. Treasuring the gift of lament will help us look more like Jesus. Therefore, we will:

C. Love the gospel more.

Lamentations teaches us about grief, certainly and I will address that, but fundamentally Lamentations is about guilt, and therefore, much of the grief that is associated with Lamentations is a grief that grows as a result of coming to terms with ones impurity. Here is what I think is one of the most beneficial aspects of Lamentations is that it helps us realize the darkness of our sin. Adultery can wreck havoc in a marriage. Homosexuality can cause confusion and estrangement in a family. Other sexual sin like incest and rape are as traumatic as any wartime experience. Addictions leave trails of carnage in their wake. All of this is true, but moral impurity is so much more than relational and personal destruction. Moral impurity pollutes a soul and the toxins are lethal. Our tendency is to apologize, do a mea culpa, "hey, my bad, sorry about that" sort of thing. But books like Lamentations force us to feel our sin so that our repentance is not academic and merely intellectual. Repentance is not a temporary embarrassment. Repentance takes time because repentance is a deep, abiding sorrow over the very nature and consequences of my sin.

Conversion is repentance and faith. It is a turning from sin and a turning to God, but that turning from sin is not merely creating a category in my mind that says sin is wrong and that God is good. It is more. It is having an affection that is disgusted by sin. Repentance involves hating sin and being repulsed by it, so that you will love God and be delighted in the gospel. The reason why some of you do not love God as you should is because you do not hate sin as you should. The more you are repulsed by the abhorrence of sin, the more you will embrace the mercy of God. The more you will be frightened by the grip of sin, the more you will excited by the grip of God. The more you are disgusted by sin and particularly your sin, the more you will be delighted by the gospel of God and the God of the gospel.

Luke 7.37-50

The deeper your repentance, the higher your delight. The greater your repentance, the greater your love. Lamentations is a part of a manual on repentance, so that we will see our need for Christ and the gospel, which will help is...

D. Love one another better.

If you are over 70, you come from an era that does not talk about these things. Therefore, you do not talk about these things and right now you are probably getting a tad uncomfortable.

However, by not talking about them, you have missed out on God's grace in your life and this has not served you well and neither have you served others well. Working through the griefs of life by means of God's Word is so freeing, it is so rich and so needed. We need to take a strong cue from Lamentations. This is a study that desperately needs to be discussed. This is what we do in our small groups. We talk about the sermon. You need to be in relationship with other believers so you can love them by listening to them and so that they can love you by listening to you. Because of Christ and the gospel we can relate to one another differently and deeper than we can outside of the church. God's Word gives us anchors so we can enter into the storms of one another's lives and not get blown away. You have brothers and sisters in Christ who need you to do that for them or will need you to do that.

E. Love your world better.

Grief is usually a lonely island. There are people in your world that you want to share Christ with, but you don't know how. There just is no opening or opportunity. They live in this world and they will experience loss and that will give you an opportunity to love them well and through that perhaps point them to Christ.

F. Pray better and worship better

Lamentations, like the Psalms of lament teach us to pray in ways that many of us typically do not pray. If we do not lament well, then we will not learn how to mourn as we should. Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who mourn.*" Think about that. Jesus places a high value on mourning. The first thing that Jesus is recorded to have said in his first public sermon is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The second thing is: "Blessed are those who mourn." Just as humility does not come natural to us, (quite the opposite) neither does a proper practice of lament. We need to cultivate a biblical view and practice of lament. And here is where we can do better as a church. Kelly Kapic wrote, "*Without space for genuine lament, false veneers and bitterness easily take root, eventually bringing destruction in their wake. ... When the homes of believers are hit by chronic pain or mental illness, they often find the contemporary church strangely unhelpful, even hurtful. A hurting family no longer fits the American Christian model of growth, happiness and victory.*"

If we do not learn to lament well, then there will be no place in our hearts and lives for those who do. The message that we will send is, you only belong here and will be comfortable here if your life is not marked with deep pain. If you have problems, there is something fundamentally wrong with you that is not wrong with the rest of us, or we are all playing make believe. Learning to lament and provide a place for that gives others a place as well.

G. Be ready for winter.

God is not only the God of the mountains, he's still God in the valley. He is not only God in the summer, he is God in the winter. He is not only God in the light, he is God in the dark and he has given us songs to sing in the night as well as the day. If we only talk about the mountains and not

the valleys, the warmth and not the cold, the light and not the dark, we will trivialize the calm and be woefully unprepared for the storm that is coming.

H. See unbelievers believe the gospel.

3. How can we benefit from this series?

A. Read Lamentations once a week.

B. Ask God to help you to think about the hard stuff.

That is new for some of you. Some of you live very distracted lives. You bounce from one Youtube video to another, from one tv show to another, from one text to another, from one game, one song, one show, one experience to another. You fear silence. You fear your own thoughts and being alone with your own soul.

- 1) What is wrong with this world?
- 2) What have I lost?
- 3) What have others around me lost?
- 4) How have I sinned against and grieved others?
- 5) How have others sinned against and grieved me?

C. Consider writing a prayer of lament.

D. Ask God to help you develop a “stubborn hope.”

Patti went 12 days without eating. I entered her hospital room on Wednesday as she was eating her first meal. She was having hospital soup. She said, “it tastes like steak.” Have you ever seen how long you could go holding your breath? When your lungs feel like they are on fire and you finally gasp, that gulp of air is so gratifying, so needful, so desperately wanted. Lamentations is like holding our breath under water. It is like going for days without eating. Lamentations is a long look at the pain of this life that allows us to feel it and be surrounded by it, without being destroyed. We will discover the power of the gospel when acknowledge the reality of sin and the grief it brings. The power of the gospel gives us a stubborn hope.

Romans 8.18-25.

Do you remember these words? “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Did you know that those words come from the middle of Lamentations? These are the words of conviction. It is not convenient nor easy to say these words. And while they are always true, when they are spoken in a funeral home, they have a little more weight than when they are spoken on a cruise ship.