

Title: Lamenting in Hope<sup>1</sup>  
Text: Lamentations 3.31-33  
Theme: Believers lament and hope  
Series: Lamentations #7  
Prop Stmtnt: The gospel enables us to lament and hope knowing that lament will end.

Sometimes when doing a funeral I will refer to a picture frame and explain that the power of the gospel and the hope of the gospel is like that frame. It holds, it contains and it borders our grief and in that way, it protects grief from overtaking and completely ruling our lives. In a similar and yet different way, Jeanette Matthews writes how lament is that frame. She says that a frame constrains the art. It tells it that you cannot go beyond this space. But the frame also heightens our awareness of what we should be looking at. A frame grabs our gaze and says, look here, right here. Concentrate on this. Don't miss this. Finally, a frame helps to shape how we are to see what is being highlighted. I think she is right and the presence of Lamentations in God's Word to us, forces us to look at it and reckon with it. Earlier in the series, I argued that 3.31-33, was the focal point. For this final sermon, I want to return to these verses in order for us to connect a few more dots before we leave this book.

Text:

Truths from the central focus of this book to remember:

- **The discipline of the LORD will end** (31).

There are two types of discipline from the Lord. Corrective discipline is designed to change your direction. You are going the wrong way and the Lord loves you too much to let you keep doing that. He will step in and tell you, then block you, then start bringing the heat. The other is Formative discipline. Formative discipline is designed to help you do something better.

The writer of Lamentations is not in rebellion against God and yet he is suffering the discipline of God because of the sins of his nation. The vast majority of the children of Israel were in rebellion and therefore the discipline was designed to be corrective. For the writer it was designed to press his trust in God even further. But he knew that the day would come when this would end. This far and no farther. Therefore, he can lament in hope. His lament does not mean that he doesn't trust God, it means that he does. Lament does not cancel out hope, in fact it helps us realize how great and real our hope is. The writer says...

- **Grief is real, but the compassion is greater** (32).

Our deepest griefs can never go deeper than God's compassion because he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love. Again, we lament in hope. Therefore...

- **God can and must be trusted** (33).

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Kopic's book on "Embodied Hope" was very helpful in helping me think through some of these things. The two charts about Lament and Hope were from pages 32-33.

This verse means that God's knee-jerk reaction is not to punish. God does not instinctively react with anger. He can and when there is no repentance he will, but punishment is not in his heart, meaning it is not something that is an automatic first response. How did God respond to Adam and Eve when they rebelled? He came to them. He provided a sacrifice for them. How did God respond to our sin? He came to us. Jesus came to us and became the sacrifice for us. This is our God. He can and must be trusted.

When I introduced the book of Lamentations a few months ago, I said that our culture is really bad at lamenting. We really do not know what to do with sorrow or loss. Our relative affluence and our culture and our hearts have all told us that we should expect a pain-free and problem-free life, and that any difficulty we face, is just a temporary season of struggle and that soon we will get through it or over it. Is that actually true?

Is that true academically? You study to pass in order to go on to study some more to pass some more to study some more to pass some more, so that you can graduate, get a job and work and work and work. Many times, the work that you do is significantly more difficult than the study that you did.

Is it true as a parent? A new mom gets morning sickness in the first trimester, is uncomfortable the second and absolutely miserable for the third. Then the baby is born and you learn all sorts of things about being colicky, teething, ear infections only to graduate to crawling and tearing everything out of cupboards and closets and finding ways to fall down the stairs. By the age of two they discover the word "no" and by the age of three discover other words that help them express their rebellion. Yes, these are stages a child goes through, but they go on to another stage with another challenge.

I do not need to belabor the point, but we never get to that point where everything in life is fine, ever. There is always something in my life that is a challenge for me to face or a difficulty that I am called to endure through. We live east of Eden. Koku Istambulova is reported to be 129 years old which makes her the oldest human being known on the planet. This week a report on her in Newsweek and a few other media outlets claims that she said that long life is a punishment from Allah and that she can only remember one day in her 129 years where she was actually happy. Now, that seems to be a bit excessive, right? But, she would not argue Job.5.7 that says that man is born to trouble as certain as the sparks fly upward. The longer we live, the more sorrow we experience and we get layered by it. That is true for all people. Sometimes, in an effort to attempt to convince someone to follow Christ we may say things that imply that being a Christian is the ticket to life on easy street. 40 years ago, there was a song called, I found the happy side of life. If it sounds cheesy, it was provolone, cheddar, pepper jack and Swiss. Well intentioned, but terrible.

Peter gives us good counsel in 1 Peter 4.12 when he says, "*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*"

Difficulty is not a surprise. The surprise is when we are not in difficulty. Expect difficulty. We are not home yet. We are not yet in glory. The wind is in our face and we are walking uphill for now. You have heard me talk to you about the “already, but not yet” tension that we live with as followers of Christ. Let me explain that again.

**I. “Already” describes my union in Christ.** (or my standing)

God, man, Christ, response

Result: I am in Christ. I am united in Christ. I have an inheritance that can never be taken away. I have an eternal home and place of rest that awaits for me. I have a future that is completely secure. Already, I am forgiven. Already, I am justified. Already, I am adopted. Already, I am in the book of life. I have all of those things now. My union in Christ is my identity.

**II. “Not yet” describes my experience.**

I have a home in heaven, but I am not there yet. This body is tethered to this earth. I live in the constraints of a body that feels and experiences the consequences of an earth that is cursed by sin. My identity is in Christ. My future is safe, therefore my happiness is safe in Christ. But I live with the struggle. I battle unbelief and pride. I battle discouragement and weariness. I battle the fear of man. Not yet am I home.

Think of it like a very long train that is two miles long. You are in the caboose when the engine is coming into the station. Has the train arrived? Yes, but you haven’t gotten there yet. You will because the caboose you are in is connected to the locomotive.

**III. We are tempted to emphasize one over the other.**

**a. What happens when you emphasize “already” and pretend that the “not yet” isn’t real?**

You are denying reality and living in fantasy land. I don’t sin. Or, I don’t have problems. I can praise away the pain and believe away all struggle. That is not being spiritual that is being ridiculous. You hear people, in some cases, well-meaning people say, “there’s healing in the atonement and they will quote, Isaiah 53, “by his stripes we are healed.” Then we will be told, that we have to claim that by faith. Yes, that is ours. It is ours in Christ but we do not experience that until glory. Romans 8 is very clear about. We are rooted to this creation, now and we groan because we live with the effects of a sin-cursed world. When you overemphasize the “already” you are not free to lament as you should because you are thinking that your problem is the result of a lack of faith, or hidden, unconfessed sin that you cannot find. I’ve seen people, well-meaning, but wrong, disrespect doctors and medical professionals attempting to help them, by claiming a healing that is not theirs to claim, yet. It is maddening.

**b. What happens when you emphasize the “not yet” and pretend that the “already” isn’t real?**

If you ignore the not yet, then you become like man who has Limburger cheese on his mustache. You think that everything stinks. Already means we have hope and it is eternal and safe. Not yet means we have struggle and it is real, but not eternal.

#### **IV. Lament in hope is the God-given language for our already but not yet life.**

Sometimes we are tempted to think of lament and hope as two opposite poles.

According to this way of looking at it, you either lament or you hope. If that is the way it is, then we would probably opt for the hope end, right? In fact, some of the counsel that we get from people reinforces that. You got close to someone and they hurt you. They disappointed you, or they walked out on you or they betrayed you. It hurts! It really hurts, and you do not like to hurt. So you decide or someone tells you, "*you need to protect your heart.*" Don't get close to someone. Don't love. Don't trust. But, think about that for a minute. If, in your attempt to avoid all lamenting, you choose not to love, you will choose to be alone. Loners trust only in themselves. But, the reason why loners tend to be a little odd, is because we do not know who we really are without others. We learn who we are as we are in relationship with others. Other people bring out different aspects of our personality. There is a sense in which the more people we know and the more people we love, the more human we are. The opposite is true. If, in your attempt to avoid all pain and all lament, you avoid people, you will be choosing not to love. If you choose not to love, it is like restricting the blood flow to your heart and little by little pieces of your heart will die until your soul has completely shriveled up.

But Lamentations and the rest of the Bible do not present lament and hope as polar opposites. Neither is that how Jesus or Paul presents it. A better way to look at lament is like this.

You are not called to embrace one over the other. You are called to live in both. This is not only true for you, but it is true for our church family. We lament and we hope at the same time and we are called to do it together. Your lament does not cancel out my hope and my lament does not cancel out your hope. You can lament with those who lament and hope with those who hope. We do both of those well if we first, love well. In fact, without lament, your hope will not have much depth to it. Paul said in Romans 8.24, "*Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?*" Living in hope does not mean that we live without lament. In fact, it is lament that gives us the context and the need for hope. Paul is saying that if everything in your life was perfect you would have no hope and no longing. If everything was perfect, you would probably have a lot of fear that things would change. The fact that we have hope means that there is something wrong in our lives and world.

Many of you have lost children in pregnancy. It may have been last month, or 45 years ago. You don't forget. Cathi and I experienced that between our 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> kids. If he was going to be a boy, we were going to name him Devin. Several years later, we started receiving mail for Devin Johnson. Losing a child, infertility and related issues are very raw and days like Mother's Day are terrible. How does lament in hope speak to the mother of three who is friends with a woman who grieves that she cannot have children? The mother of three may be experiencing the hope part, but she can love her friend well and enter into her lament. At the same time, the girl who is grieving can learn to love others well too and enter into their hope without denying or stuffing

her lament. If I do not love you well, then I will be put off by your lament and will not want to help you bear your burden. But the other side is true. If I do not love well, then I will be put off by your hope and will not want to rejoice with you. Just as my lament does not cancel out my hope, neither does your lament cancel out my hope. Just my hope does not eliminate my lament, neither does your hope eliminate my lament. I am and we are both - all the time.

A friend of mine picks out the music that his church sings congregationally on Sunday morning. What if you had that job? What would you pick? If you were sad, you would probably be tempted to pick songs about suffering and enduring through sorrow. If you were happy, you would likely be tempted to pick songs about joy and praise. My friend said that he picks songs so that, if you got engaged last night and your heart was full of excitement and praise to God for this wonderful occasion, that there would be a song in the service that would give you the occasion to express that to God. He said that he also picks songs so that if you broke up with your boyfriend or girlfriend last night, that there would also be a song that would give you the occasion to express that heartache to God as well.

Now, we live 2,600 hundred years after Lamentations, and more importantly, we live after advent of Christ. Christ did these two things perfectly: 1) He lamented perfectly and his perfect lamenting was not only for us (because of us) it was for us (in our place). There is a sense in which his entire life was a lament, and the closer he came to the cross, the heavier the weight he bore. You have heard the expression that she “died with a broken heart.” There is truth to that. If someone tries to fully enter into the grief of this world and take it completely upon them, they will die. We simply do not have the emotional, psychological or physical bandwidth to take on the suffering around us. Jesus did. He died bearing your sins and your burdens because he lived bearing your sins and your burdens. He entered fully into them.

Through the years, I have been drawn over and over to John 11 and the story of the resurrection of Lazarus. I’ve been particularly intrigued by the fact that Jesus wept. Some have speculated that he wept because of the unbelief of the people. No, that doesn’t fit the story. He wept in response to the grief of his friends Mary and Martha. Their loss was fully entered into by Christ and it was not just the fact that he felt sorry for them and bore their grief on an emotional level. He felt in his own being the full weight of the consequences of sin. The words that John uses to describe his weeping are very strong. We could describe his response as the dam bursting. He almost raged against death itself. He was being crushed by this because he was able to enter into this sorrow so much deeper than either Mary or Martha. Think of that: He can enter into your sorrow deeper than you can and he can carry it all.

Today, Bobby and Taylor leave after church for VA. This is the beginning of the separation that we are experiencing as a family as they prepare to go to Ghana. Before this schedule was in place, I was asked to be the keynote speaker at a pastor’s conference in North Dakota for the past two days. I was torn. I wanted to be here, but had to be there. I went to bed and got up knowing that I needed to finish this sermon, which meant that I could not give their leaving the place in my heart that I really to give it. I will grieve later because I just couldn’t grieve now. Jesus never had to, nor has to make that choice. Christ lamented perfectly, and 2) Christ perfectly secured our hope. His death on the cross, paid in full the penalty of the sins of every single person who

would ever believe on him, because in his death, Christ fully absorbed the wrath of God that should be poured out on us. He took it all. He bore it all. He paid it all. It's done. It is finished.

The great takeaway for us therefore is this: In our sorrow, Christ came. He came to us. He came not only to be with us, He came and became one of us. If you have a terminal disease, or a condition in your life or in the life of your child that will most likely never go away, you live with lament. In your lament, know that the great Lamenter is there. He is present. His presence is a gift for you and to you. This is a powerful lesson to us. As the body of Christ, we reveal him to each other, when we come alongside one another in their grief. Not to lecture or pontificate, but to be there. That is what Jesus did and does.

A man, (from Georgia) living under the strains of this life, wrote this lament to God.

Why did my daughter's husband break her heart?

I know little child.

Won't you tell me Father?

I won't, my son.

Why does my wife have to live in pain?

I know little child.

Won't you tell me Father, it would make it easier

It wouldn't my son.

Why do parents have to bury their children? It isn't right.

It isn't, little child.

Then get rid of death, Father.

I am, my son.

Why are your people abused, persecuted and killed? Can't you protect them?

I can, little child.

Then do something.

I did, my son.

Why do my parents need to finish their lives in unrelenting misery? How is that merciful?

It is, little child.

Then I don't understand mercy.

You don't, my son.

But it all hurts so much sometimes

I know it does, little child.

How do you know Father?

I have felt all the pain of sin, my son.

Can't you make it all stop?

I can, little child.

Then do it, Father.

I started 2,000 years ago and will finish soon, my son.

I believe you, Father, help my unbelief

I love you, my son.

