

Title: A Time to Mourn
Text: Lamentations 1
Theme: Overwhelmed with sorrow
Series: Lamentations #2
Prop Stmtnt: God speaks to us and for us when words fail us in our grief.

Lamentations is the graphic description of Jerusalem after she was devastated by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Babylon and Egypt were the two super powers fighting for world supremacy and Judah was in the middle. Politically, the question was: whose side will you pick? You need to be on the side of the one who wins. But for Judah the issue was not one of politics, it was one of worship. Who or what are you going to worship and trust? Will you trust Yahweh? Will you trust Jehovah? Will you keep the covenant that you have with God? Not only did Judah refuse to trust in God, but she then trusted in the wrong side of the world war. Egypt lost and Nebuchadnezzar was going to teach Judah and Jerusalem a lesson. This is what happens to those who rebel against me. The fury is astounding. The devastation is massive. Lamentations is like a verbal holocaust museum. But as you know, history is actually His story. And the story behind the story is God, who uses Babylon as an instrument of judgement on his people because of their relentless rebellion. Their sin is stunning and now their punishment is overwhelming. It is so bad, that you don't want to look. There are things you don't want to know, but you know that you need to. Part of what makes this book so challenging to us, is that it doesn't really move on. There is no resolution at the end where the bad guy loses and the good guy wins and everything is cool again. In fact, the book feels like we are stuck in an eternal present of doom. And yet, for those of you who experience seasons of depression that is what it is like, isn't it? One pastor described his times of depression as being stuck on a cliff where there are no ledges to reach for. Lamentations can feel like that. We are stuck in grief. But while there are so many aspects of this book that look and feel like depression, it really isn't a case study in depression. It is the anguished cry of the people of God over the loss of their city, their temple, their nation, their life and seemingly, their future. Life will never be the same again. This is a time to mourn.

Read Text: Lamentations 1

For several months, a distinguished lady in our congregation came up to me after the morning service and would warmly shake my hand and say, "Oh, I don't have the words." When she first did it, I thought that she had been impacted in some way by the sermon and I was grateful for it. But, when it happened Sunday after Sunday I knew that something wasn't right. Every so often, I may hit a double or a triple, but most Sundays I'm glad if I can make it to first base. Eventually, I realized that she had dementia and was rapidly losing ground with it. So, when she said to me, "Oh, I don't have the words." It was true! Eventually, she would just shake my hand.

But, sometimes we don't have the words because we are attempting to express or explain something that is overwhelming to us. How do you do that? I believe that not only the words of this book, but the structure of this book attempts to do that. The book has 5 chapters. Each chapter is a poem. Chapter 1 has 22 verses, as does chapters 2, 4 and 5. And really, you could say that chapter 3 has 22 verses too as I will explain. Chapter 3 has 66 verses (22 x 3). What is the significance of 22? There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. In chapter 1, 2 and 4 each verse begins with the next letter in the alphabet. Verse 1 begins with the Hebrew, "A", verse two

– “B”, etc. Some have speculated that this is the author’s way of saying that behind all of the chaos that this book describes, there is still order. I think that could be true. But, I think there is more to it.

There are two other examples in the Bible of this kind of poetry. The first is Psalm 119 and the other is Proverbs 31. In Psalm 119, the author is attempting to describe how incredible God’s Word is and in Proverbs 31, the author is attempting to describe how incredible a virtuous woman is. I think that the reason why the author is using all of the letters of the alphabet is his way of saying that this subject is so big, so important, so overwhelming that it takes the entire alphabet, it takes all of my words to convey it. It’s just too big for words. But there is more.

Jack and Jill went up a hill to fetch a pail of **water**
Jack fell down and broke his crown and Jill came tumbling **after**

Hebrew poetry has rhythm as well and, like English it has different types of rhythms. The meter and cadence of Lamentations is for the most part a meter used for mourning. I am going to get a little detailed here but I think it is worth it so you can see what is happening.

Chapter 1 and chapter 2 has a A1, 2-3 pattern. There are three stanzas in each line. But look at chapter 3. In chapter 3, the pattern is A1, A2, A3, then B1, B2, B3, etc. This goes on for 66 verses, which really is 22 groups of 3 and could actually be given 22 verses (and I think it should). Chapter 4 follows a A1, 2 then B1, 2 pattern. There are 2 stanzas per letter, while chapter 5 has a 2 stanza meter, but not an acrostic, although there are 22 verses. So, in terms of meter, chapters 1, 2 and 3 are the same and chapters 4 and 5 are the same. In terms of acrostic, chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 follow the Hebrew alphabet, but chapter 5, while similar to chapter 4 in meter does not use the alphabet as an acrostic, but the fact that it has 22 verses is obviously by design.

But, there is something else that we need to see. All of this meter, cadence, acrostic stuff is not just artsy fluff. The poet, the author utilizes these as tools to help us see and feel the message. Chapter 1 and chapter 2 have a similar 3-line acrostic pattern. Chapter 3 is the most intense acrostic, while chapter 4, has an acrostic, but less intense than chapters 1 and 2 and while chapter 5 has a similar meter, the acrostic stuff fades out completely. The point is, the meter and structure build to chapter 3 and then lessen and fade in chapters 4 and 5. This is a way of drawing our attention to chapter 3. Well, that makes sense, since chapter 3 is the center of the book. And Hebrew poetry loves to use chiastic structures to point to the main point. And what is the center of chapter 3? (read verses 31-36) We are to read the rest of the book under the umbrella of this central message. This message is the frame that holds our grief.

Now, that is a lot of detail, and while you may be tempted to think that some of it was a bit too technical, I want you to know of the intense labor, thought and skill that went into to writing these laments. Look at all of this time and incredible artistry that God gave and employed so that his people would have a means to grieve. Just as God is serious about joy, God is serious about grief. There is a season for everything under heaven - a time to mourn is one of those seasons. He knows that his people will mourn. He knows that we need to mourn. People who mourn over their sin and over the sins of others have a place right next to the heart of God. That means that

in the times when we are tempted to feel that we are the furthest away from God are in a sense the times when we are the closest. But, that is not immediately obvious is it? Especially in the middle of the storm, or in the dark night of the soul. Only later on do we see the hand of God. And I think that is part of what the author, the poet is telling us. There is a message of hope in this book and it is a powerful one, but it is not immediately obvious. There are clues that point to it. Clues for us to follow, but you have to look for them, just as there are clues in your grief and sorrow for you to follow. In fact, Lamentations it self is a wonderful gift from God that teaches a great deal about our griefs and sorrows and ultimately about him who bore them all.

Now, the meter, the structure and acrostics are fascinating, and they hold clues to what we should look for, but all of that is honestly like the trusses and studs that are covered by the roof and walls. The words themselves are the things that we really see. And in this first poem, the author helps us feel both shame and grief and he does so by the use of two perspectives; the observer and the city. Most of the first part of this chapter are the words of an eyewitness, a reporter, a tour guide who lived here in Jerusalem before she was devastated by the Babylonians. The book comes after Jeremiah, because Jewish tradition believes that Jeremiah wrote it. I think that he probably did, though I will call him the poet or the author. In chapter 1, there are 2 speakers and 2 audiences. 2 speakers: the citizen who functions as a tour guide and the city. 2 audiences: the reader who is on the guided tour and God (who doesn't appear to respond). In the first part of chapter 1 is primarily the citizen tour guide who is describing his shame by describing the shame of his city.

I. What a shame (1-11)

Shame is seen when the accused is being escorted into the police station and he covers his face from the TV cameras. Shame is your child finding it so hard to look you in the eye after he has sinned. Shame is the sense of being dirty, of losing control of ones bowels, of being discovered in a state of dark sin. The poet, painfully, explicitly, artistically describes this shame by using various characters of women. This is the shame of a widow who is left all alone and feels left out and vulnerable (1). This is the shame of a princess who always was pampered and proper, whose delicate fingers and soft skin were never calloused by hard work, nor weathered by the hot sun, who now finds herself working as a slave. Both of these, the widow and the princess used to have standing, used to have glory, used to have prestige, used to have respect but are now treated as being on the trash heap of the world.

The whole thing begins with “How” (ekah) a word of emotive exclamation that is often used for dirges and laments. This is the word that David used 3x in his classic lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1.19, 25, 27).

In v.2 the woman is abandoned by her lovers, which begins to darken the scene as we realize that this woman (the city) was once a popular prostitute who is now abandoned and left to die of her diseases. She was also a popular girl who lived life in the fast lane, who got invited to all of the big events, who now finds herself betrayed by all those she thought were her friends. In v.5, 16, 18, she is a mother who has lost all of her children. Over and over we read, “no comfort” (theme of chapter 1). This is shame that has no hope and seemingly no end. The poet describes the city as someone who used to be beautiful, used to be wealthy, used to be admired, used to be

powerful, used to be envied, but who is now sickly, diseased, ugly, revolting, begging, and abandoned. The poet is like a tour guide who slowly walks us through the streets, describing what life used to be like, even as we see the bloated bodies and gag on the overwhelming stench of decay. In v. 8 he speaks to the why, not just to the what. This happened because Jerusalem sinned and she sinned grievously. Her sin was the reason why she is so filthy, so despised, so humiliated and so groaning.

In the middle of v.9, there is a brief switch from the tour guide to the city. The city is portrayed as not only a woman, but one who speaks and she says. “*O LORD* (covenant name for God), *behold my affliction,*” (do you see my pain? Do you see my anguish? Do you see what is happening to me? – implied – do you care?) then, “*for the enemy has triumphed!*” The city is traumatized. She cannot believe that this has happened and has no category for it. In v.10, the guide continues the tour as we come to the rubble of the temple. Like one who was molested, the nations (soldiers, the enemy) raped the temple. They went where they were forbidden, touched, what wasn’t theirs, did what they wanted to and left her crying and shaking in distress. It is graphic language. The end of the first portion (halfway through the 22 verses) is a pitiful picture. The people groan as they search for food. They trade their treasures for food. Treasures don’t mean anything if you can’t eat. And then, the city speaks again (11b).

Do you remember what the Jewish leaders said to Pilate during the trial of Christ? Pilate was saying that after examining the case against Christ, that there wasn’t anything that Jesus had done that was worthy of death. One of the responses of the leaders was, “His blood be on us and on our children!” Every time I read that, I feel such a kick in my gut that it’s as if all the air in my lungs gets punched out. That is the message and the emotion of this text. For years, Judah sinned casually and deliberately, daring God to act. It’s that same flippant response you hear when someone says, “I kind of prefer hell, that is where all my friends will be.” You have no idea what you are asking for. The shame of the city is expressed as a grief that is too heavy to bear. Now the city talks for most of the rest of the opening poem we listen to her grief.

II. What a grief (12-22)

In verse 12, not having aroused the attention of God, the city lashes out at us as we go through on our walking tour. The guide told us back in v.4 that the roads that led to Zion are mourning, now we hear Zion herself crying out in grief. The city blames God! God did this to me and what I am suffering is worse than anyone could ever imagine. That is how it felt. That is how it feels to us. Yea, God I know that I mess up. I know that I do some sinful things, but did it have to come to this? This is how the city talks about God. God sent the fire that destroyed me (13). God spread a net that captured me. God has stunned me and left me faint. God has taken my transgressions (14) and made them into a yoke that I am enslaved to. V. 14 is a hard testimony to listen to. The city is saying I wanted my sin so much, I pursued my sin so much, that God finally just let me have it all and now my sin owns me and it is crushing me. This is the experience of the addict who plays with the alcohol, or sex, or drugs, or whatever but finds that he or she is so owned by it that the very thing that made him the life of the party now makes him the outcast. His transgressions are his yoke. The thing that looked to be so wild and free is really a curse.

In v.16, the city weeps and like v.2 we read that she has no one to comfort her. Years ago, she told God to leave her alone. She didn't want him or his laws around anymore. She wanted to be like the rest of the nations. Now, she is discovering what that is really like.

The guide speaks in v.17, pointing out how the city is stretching out her hands like a dying beggar pleading for some pity, some mercy, some help. Again, there is none to comfort her. Her neighbors that she should have been able to count on, are her enemies and she is considered to be filthy, impure, toxic or polluted. She is now an embarrassment to her world.

Then come the words that we have longed to hear. There aren't enough of them, not yet anyway, but there is this confession of sin (18a), but all too quickly the city shifts the attention from the depth of her sin to the depth of her suffering. Her sin has caused her suffering but she can't yet come to grips with it. She is too overwhelmed with her grief. In fact, in v.18 she speaks of calling to her lovers again and we want to say, "what are you thinking?" This is what got you into trouble to begin with. You pursued relationships that were wrong. Don't you see? You did things with others that God said was off limits for you and yet you insisted on it. Your lovers were not lovers.

Now the city is begging for God to act. My stomach is killing me, my heart is getting ripped out of my chest because I have been rebellious and there is no where to go. In the street, the sword kills, in the houses, it is only death. The chapter ends with the city bitterly bemoaning the betrayal of her neighbors and wishing for them that they suffer the same fate as her. How should we think about this?

- 1) People really grieve differently.

And this is rather obvious, but it really needs to be repeated. Think about all of the different women who are presented in this poem? The widow is grieving her loss of identity, standing, protection and companion. The princess is grieving her loss of position and status. The prostitute is grieving the fact that she has been betrayed by all those who used to want her. The mother is grieving the fact that her children have been taken from her or are dead, or both. All of them are grieving and they grieve in different ways. And rather than say, "hey statistics will tell you that women tend to outlive men," or, "hey princess, welcome to my life, welcome to how the rest of us live" or, "seriously, did you actually think that those guys who were paying you for your services actually cared about you" or "yea, mothers throughout the history of our world have lost their children to war, it's one of the reasons why couples were encouraged to have large families. You would probably lose some to sickness or war." None of those statements are helpful to the one grieving, are they? These women are all grieving but they are grieving differently and this is good for me and you to take the time to think about that.

Beloved, one of the worst things that you can tell someone who is grieving is that you know exactly what they are feeling. Do not assume that you know. In fact, you will probably not help them, if you take their grief and turn it into an opportunity for you to tell them all of the ways that you have suffered. "Oh yea, you think your kidney stone was bad? I had three colonoscopies the week after a root canal. Man they were drillin' from both ends! Not helpful! What is it like to suffer the loss of your spouse? I don't know that unless I listen and ask good questions and listen

some more. What is it like to fall from favor, to lose esteem, to go from being respected to being rejected? Every situation is worthy of time.

2) Grief is usually not rational.

When the city speaks, she simultaneously blames God and cries to God. She cries for her lovers, she misses them, yet this is what contributed to her judgment. You can have an adulterous relationship that devastates your life and family and you lose everything, and yet in your deep loss find yourself missing that person. You can be so addicted to alcohol that you lose everything, and yet in your deep loss still find yourself wanting a drink. And yet, this is a book that God put into the Bible. He knows this is our tendency, so he gives us space for this. And it makes sense. God is the one who has brought this judgment upon her and God is the only one who can save her. God does not expect nor should we for people who are suffering to be perfectly rational and logical. When everything that I have known or everything that I thought would be has been thrown upside down, I have just lost my categories and bearings. It's ok.

3) Repentance takes time.

Chapter 1 does not look like godly sorrow. The city is crying way more over what she has lost and her dreadful circumstances than she is the nature of her sin and how she has so deeply offended God. There are three lines in chapter 1 where she says, "I did this." But, it is not the prevailing theme, not yet, but it is a start. This is an important part of this book. We need to take time to mourn the consequences of our sin so that we can learn to hate the sin itself.

4) Sin is really bad.

Sin is really not fun, good, safe, or private. The weight, the grief, the consequences, are too great for anyone to bear. We cannot handle sin nor its punishment.

5) Think of what Jesus bore.

Surely, he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows. Jesus took upon himself all of our sin and all of its shame and all of its grief. He is acquainted with grief. He is very familiar with it. And this is what is so good for us. Chapter 1 has no comfort in it. She sobs at night when all is dark and she is alone. There is no one to hold her, no one to talk to here. There is no resolution, no reassurance. It is mourning and it is raw and it doesn't end. But that does not have to be your story. That does not have to be your end.

6) Don't forget the message.

3.31-33

In order to feel the relief of that message, I need to feel the depth of loss. But, we don't have time for that. We want to move on and we want others to move on. Feeling the loss, is like holding our breath under water. This gives us a desire for air.