

Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

The Land of Lament

2 Chronicles 36:11-21

Mark Vroegop

¹¹ Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem.

¹² He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. ¹³ He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel. ¹⁴ All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem. ¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy. ¹⁷ Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. ¹⁸ And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. ¹⁹ And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. ²⁰ He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years (2 Chronicles 36:11-21).

To cry is inherently human; to lament is inherently Christian. That was one of the key thoughts from last week's message, but do you know why that is true? What is Christian about lament? Why can Christians lament when non-Christians really cannot?

I've spent a lot of time thinking about this concept over the last number of months, and especially as our staff took some time to pray over the cards that we turned in last week. Here is what I think the difference is between a human cry and a Christian lament. Crying acknowledges the reality of pain, the difficulty of loss, and emotional trauma of something bad happening. Crying is the outward and physical expression of painful emotions. It is an appropriate and natural response to pain, tragedy, loss, hurt, and disappointment. Crying is a human reaction to suffering of any kind.

Lament is everything that I just described (it too involves crying), but with a deeper meaning and a different focus. Biblical lament adds something both underneath and above crying. Why is there any crying in the world? Where does crying come from? The Bible answers that question by telling us that the cause of death, pain, and tragedies is the presence of sin in the world. Underneath our tears and the reason that we are crying is the spiritual reality of a created order that is broken and

flawed. Biblical lament expresses sorrow while acknowledging the bigger and ultimate problem of sin in the world. Christian lament grapples with a deeper problem, which is why Jesus was called “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). He, more than anyone who walked on earth, understood the depth of the problem embedded into our humanity.

Above and beyond our crying, Christian lament adds something more to tears. It provides hope. You might think it ironic at first, but Biblical lament requires faith, and it is essentially a prayer. Christian lament knows the cause of sorrow, understands the solution, and longs for the promised deliverance. Lament wrestles with the tension that God is good, but bad things still happen. Lament struggles with the promise that one day there will be no more pain, tears, and death (Rev. 21:4), but that day has not yet come.

Lament acknowledges the ultimate cause of suffering and longs for the promised resolution. Christians can truly lament because they understand the full story of redemption. Crying expresses sorrow over pain while Christian lament goes further; it interprets the cause and the trajectory of pain. That is why I believe that to cry is human but to lament is Christian.

What is Lament?

This is our second week talking about the subject of lament with a view toward a study of the five chapters of Lamentations. Last week I introduced this subject by looking at Psalm 77, which provides a great model for personal and corporate lament. Let me give you a few highlights:

- A lament gives voice and words to emotions and questions that believers face in the midst of suffering, pain, and hardship.
- Laments wrestle with at least two questions: “Where are you, God?” and “If you love me, why is this happening?”
- Since the audience of a lament is God, every lament is really a prayer. And we learned that it takes faith to pray prayers of lament.
- The opposites of lament are despair and prayerlessness, and they are often linked together as unbelief settles into the heart of a person in pain. Lament is both an act of worship and a means of leading us to worship. Lament keeps us out of two spiritual ditches: “You owe me” and “It’s over.”
- While laments may express deep emotions and ask painful questions, there is a difference between asking God and accusing God. It is a sin to accuse God, as if you sit in judgment of Him. Laments wrestle honestly with the tough tension related to the mystery of God’s plans and purposes.

Lament is an important and biblical category that we need to understand and embrace. We need lament not only because it is in the Bible, but also because there is far more pain in our church than we even realize.

As our staff spent time praying for the cards that were turned in on Sunday, we were stunned with what lies beneath the surface of our church family. Needless to say, we have much to lament. So we need to learn this language.

Categories of Lament

Today our text is 2 Chronicles 36, which is the historical background behind the book of Lamentations. It is the setting in which the book of Lamentations was written, and I want to spend some time unpacking what led to the Bible's longest lament, because I think it will create a category of lament that may not be familiar to you.

I believe that there is a particular lens through which most of us view suffering and lament. The cause of this is two-fold: our nature as humans and our Western American culture. I think that we tend to over-individualize our suffering, and if we do lament, we can tend to only focus on our suffering, our pain, or our disappointment. Now, I'm not saying that is necessarily wrong (although it could be), but I simply want you to realize that there is a strong gravitational pull because of who we are and because our culture tends to limit our understanding of lament to our individual sufferings.

This manifests itself, for instance, when we try to help people in their sorrow by too quickly telling our story of how we have suffered. It surfaces when a person or a group of people are suffering, and yet we feel no need to lament because the pain doesn't directly affect us. But it also appears when hardship comes on a family, a city, or a nation. In that situation there is a temptation to be annoyed or angry that you are personally impacted when you are not directly involved. You might be an innocent bystander experiencing suffering because of what is happening around you.

Therefore, you need to think of lament in at least two categories: personal lament and community lament. Personal lament would involve crying out to God because of your own sinfulness (Ps. 38), because of people sinning against you (Ps. 31), because of what you see the wicked do (Ps. 10), because of personal betrayal (Ps. 55), or because of suffering in general (Ps. 22). But lament is not only about personal struggles.

A very significant number of laments are written to express grief because of what has happened to an entire people. Lament, in this case, mourns much more than individual suffering. Communal laments mourn suffering on a much larger scale. A few examples:

¹⁰ You have made us turn back from the foe, and those who hate us have gotten spoil. ¹¹ You have made us like sheep for slaughter and have scattered us among the nations. ¹² You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them. ¹³ You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us. ¹⁴ You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. Psalm 44:10–14 (ESV)

¹ O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; oh, restore us. ² You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open; repair its breaches, for it totters. ³ You have made your people see hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger. Psalm 60:1–3 (ESV)

²⁰ Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. ²¹ Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame; let the poor and needy praise your name. ²² Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day! ²³ Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually! Psalm 74:20–23 (ESV)

⁷ For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. ⁸ You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. ⁹ For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. ¹⁰ The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. ¹¹ Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? ¹² So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. ¹³ Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants! Psalm 90:7–13 (ESV)

Communal laments give voice to the suffering of a group of people or a nation. These laments express the sorrow of what is happening to the culture, the city, the nation, or a family. They wrestle with the same kind of questions that we find in individual laments, but the context is much broader. Communal laments mourn widespread hardship, institutionalized sinfulness, or national discipline. They express sadness, cry out to God for help, and serve as a “wake-up” call for the present generation and for future generations who would read them.

Therefore, as we study Lamentations and the subject of lament, I want you to consider what you have to lament personally. But I also want to expand your vision and understanding of what it means to be a part of a community that is lamenting. There may be laments that we should be praying on behalf of our culture. In other words, what emotions and what prayers should flow from your heart when our economy or our culture or our security falls apart? What kind of prayers should we pray when our leaders are ungodly and when unrighteousness seems to reign? What should you pray when you read the newspaper, watch the news, or get a disturbing report? Is there anything that perhaps we should be lamenting, but we are not? Next week, on Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, I’m going to illustrate this and challenge us how and what we should be praying about in relation to abortion, orphans, racism, justice, and a number of other topics.

To cry is human, but to lament is Christian. And if Christianity is able to correctly interpret pain and suffering, then we ought to not only lament our sorrows but also the sorrows of other people, our city, and our nation. Those who understand the nature of sin and plan of redemption ought to know how to lament for more than their own struggles. We ought to know the language of community lament.

Behind Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is a community lament written to reflect upon the greatest devastation that the nation of Israel ever faced. It expresses deep and graphic sorrow for the disaster that has fallen upon the people of God. 2 Chronicles 36 provides the narrative.

After the reigns of David and Solomon, the golden years of Israel, the nation was divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom, with ten tribes, was called Israel, and the southern kingdom, with two tribes, was called Judah. The problem for both kingdoms was their increasing disloyalty to God. The Northern Kingdom failed more quickly, as they were led by wicked king after wicked king, until the nation of Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BC. The captivity of Israel should have been a warning to Judah. But as we see in 2 Chronicles 36, Judah experienced the same divine discipline. Judah was left in ruins.

There are five kings who are mentioned in this chapter, leading up to the fall of the Southern Kingdom. Josiah is mentioned as the father of King Jehoahaz, and he is important because Josiah was the last godly king who reigned in Jerusalem. Under his leadership there was great spiritual and social reform, but after his death, the nation began to unravel politically, socially, financially, morally, and spiritually. Less than thirty years from Josiah's death, the nation was gone.¹

The Ancient Near East during this time period was in the midst of much turmoil and a shifting power base. Assyria had been the dominant power in the region under Tiglath-pileser III, who reigned from 745-727 BC. However, the Babylonian empire began to challenge Assyria for dominance, and in 612 BC, the capital city of Ninevah fell to the Babylonians, something detailed in the book of Nahum. Babylon completely subdued and assimilated the Assyrian Empire in 609 BC, the same year that Josiah was killed in a battle with Egypt.²

Jehoahaz was the next king of Judah, but he only reigned for three months. Like so many other kings, he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Kings 23:32), and the king of Egypt took him captive, brought him as a prisoner to Egypt, and laid a tribute on the land of Judah. Jehoahaz's brother, Eliakim, was made king of Judah after his name was changed to Jehoiakim.

Jehoiakim was just as wicked as the previous kings. He also did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God (2 Chron. 36:5). Jeremiah 25-26 tell us that Jehoiakim led the people into further idolatry, a refusal to listen to God's Word, and the persecution of the prophets. As a result, Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon, made Judah his vassal and eventually took Jehoiakim to Babylon as his prisoner. It was during this time that Daniel and his three friends were deported to Babylon (Daniel 1:1-2) and that Nebuchadnezzar began raiding the treasures of the temple.

The next king was Jehoiachin, and he also did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Chron. 36:9). His reign was very short (about three months), and he abdicated the throne after the Babylonian forces put Jerusalem under a punishing siege. Upon his surrender, the Babylonians raided the temple, the palace, and carried off "all the officials . . . all the mighty men of valor . . . all the craftsmen and the smiths" (2 Kings 24:14-15). In other words, he decapitated the leadership of the nation. Ezekiel was a part of this deportation (Ezekiel 1:1-3). All that was left was the poorest in the land (2 Kings 24:14). And Nebuchadnezzar put Zedekiah on the throne.

Zedekiah reigned for eleven years, and he followed the pattern of the previous kings in terms of his wickedness and evil. However, Zedekiah's rule is the climax of the rebelliousness of God's people, and we have additional color provided in 2 Chronicles 36:11-16. Take note of the pride, the hard-heartedness, the spiritual pollution, the widespread unfaithfulness, and the mocking, scoffing, and despising of God's word and His messengers.

¹¹ Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. ¹² He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. ¹³ He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart

¹ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1365.

² Ibid.

against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel. ¹⁴ All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem. ¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy. (2 Chronicles 36:11–16)

Do not miss the weight of the words “until there was no remedy.” The nation had strayed far enough and long enough. God had reached a point where He could no longer allow the nation to continue. The time for judgment had come.

There is an important word in verse 17: *Therefore*. The text tells us not only that the Chaldeans (Babylonians) came up against the people of God, but also that God was the one who brought them. God was sovereignly directing a pagan nation as a means of judgment of his own people. Verses 17-21 are sobering:

¹⁷... who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. ¹⁸ And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. ¹⁹ And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. ²⁰ He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, ²¹ to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. 2 Chronicles 36:17–21 (ESV)

The destruction of Jerusalem was now complete. After a three-year siege in which the Babylonians nearly starved the people to death, a breach was made in the wall, and the Babylonian army sacked Jerusalem, burning the temple and tearing down the walls surrounding the city of David. Everything of value was removed from the temple and taken back to Babylon, and those who did not die in the invasion were taken to Babylon as servants and slaves. Only a handful of the poorest of people were left in the city.

The temple that used to be a dwelling place for God and the city that was to be a light to the nations was now a smoldering ruin. The rebellion of God’s people had brought widespread disaster, death, destruction, and deportation. God’s chosen people were now dead, displaced, or destitute.

That is why Lamentations 1:1-2 sounds the way that it does:

¹ How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. ² She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies. Lamentations 1:1–2 (ESV)

What's more, the person writing those words is the prophet Jeremiah. He was a prophet who is known as the "weeping prophet" because of his lament: *"Oh that my head were waters and my eyes a fountain of tears that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people"* (Jeremiah 9:1). He had a very difficult ministry, and we only know of two converts from his ministry. God commanded him not to marry, and his own people plotted to kill him. Jeremiah's calls for repentance and renewal were not embraced by Judah's leaders or her people.

The destruction of Jerusalem because of the hard-heartedness of the people is exactly what Jeremiah continually warned the people about. Just read Jeremiah 21-29, and you will see the extent of his warnings. Lamentations puts into a poem a lament for the destruction and the pain that has been visited upon the people of God.

And yet, as we will see, it is not just a rehearsing of the devastation; it is a lament that is designed to deal with both the tragedy of what has happened and the hope of God's future restoration. Lamentations is appropriately dark, but it is not without hope.

Lessons from the Land of Lament

As we consider this important and helpful biblical category of lament, we see some spiritual lessons that we need to learn as we approach this subject:

1. Sin has affected everything

The reason why lament is inherently Christian, and why Christianity is able to interpret the brokenness in the world, is because of the Bible's understanding of the problem of sin in the world. The Bible tells us that God is holy, that mankind's greatest problem is that we have all fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23), and that the entire creation groans under this brokenness (Rom. 8:22). A Christian understands that underneath every problem in life is the reality of sin.

But the Bible also tells us that sin and brokenness are not the end of the story. Through the death of Jesus, God made it possible for sin to be forgiven. Those who receive Christ understand both the problem of sin and the remedy offered through Jesus. So while a Christian understands the problem of sin and laments the effects of sins, he or she longs for the day when sin will no longer ravage the world.

Christians believe that grace is amazing. We have tasted it. But we also know that sin ruins everything, and we mourn its presence in the world.

2. Our sin and our suffering are not the only problem

Sin affects people and relationships, but it also affects families, cities, and nations. Our rebellion against God surfaces on a personal level, but it also emerges in our society, the cities, and the nations in which we live. I hope last week was helpful in giving you a category for your personal pain, but I

want you to remember that your pain is not the only pain. We tend to over-individualize suffering, and Lamentations will show us the importance of lamenting on a larger scale.

I hope that you will not only start to pray lament-oriented prayers for your own pain, but also for what you see around you. I hope that your heart will be awakened to the “groan” of the creation around you. I pray that God will open your eyes to see the brokenness around you. I’m praying that God would give you a bigger heart for what is wrong with your neighborhood, our city, our nation and our world, and not just for what is wrong with your life.

3. Lament turns the heart toward worship and awakens slumbering hearts

I said last week that lament is the bridge between your pain and praise. Lament is how a painful heart is tuned to sing God’s song. Lament is how we reorient our hearts away from anger, frustration, and despair. Lament starts us on a faith-filled path of worship.

Lament does this at a personal level, but it also does it on a corporate level. When the bottom drops out of your family, your culture, your city, or your nation, where do you go? Often Christians can react with anger, fear, apathy, or despair. Even followers of Jesus can look at the collapse around us and begin to act as if we are overly beholden to our culture and as if we do not know the long arc of human history. So rather than be angry, fearful, apathetic, or in despair, we should lament. We should do what Jeremiah did at the fall of Jerusalem. We should use lament to draw us out of a limited perspective on the effects of a broken world and allow it to remind us of the bigger plan of God.

What’s more, we should listen to the laments in the Bible and allow them to awaken our hearts. We should listen to Lamentations in order to be reminded that God is holy and our culture is not. And there comes a time when God says “Enough.” We should use lament to awaken our hearts to the brokenness that is around us that we can easily forget, suppress or ignore.

Lament reminds us that there is something wrong with the world. And it points us to the one who can ultimately make everything right. Laments turns our hearts Godward as we are reminded in a minor key that individually, corporately, and nationally we need His mercy. Lament reminds that the problem in the world is sin, and God is the only one who can truly bring a solution.

To cry is human; to lament is Christian.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com