

## Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

The Reality: Reconciling Helplessness and Hope

Lamentations 4:1-11; 21-22

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<sup>1</sup> How the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold is changed! The holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street. <sup>2</sup> The precious sons of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold, how they are regarded as earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands! <sup>3</sup> Even jackals offer the breast; they nurse their young, but the daughter of my people has become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness. <sup>4</sup> The tongue of the nursing infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food, but no one gives to them. <sup>5</sup> Those who once feasted on delicacies perish in the streets; those who were brought up in purple embrace ash heaps. <sup>6</sup> For the chastisement of the daughter of my people has been greater than the punishment of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, and no hands were wrung for her. <sup>7</sup> Her princes were purer than snow, whiter than milk; their bodies were more ruddy than coral, the beauty of their form was like sapphire. <sup>8</sup> Now their face is blacker than soot; they are not recognized in the streets; their skin has shriveled on their bones; it has become as dry as wood. <sup>9</sup> Happier were the victims of the sword than the victims of hunger, who wasted away, pierced by lack of the fruits of the field. <sup>10</sup> The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food during the destruction of the daughter of my people. <sup>11</sup> The LORD gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations.

<sup>21</sup> Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz; but to you also the cup shall pass; you shall become drunk and strip yourself bare. <sup>22</sup> The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish; he will uncover your sins. (Lamentations 4:1–11, 21-22)

One of the many reasons that I love the book of Lamentations is because of what the book does not do. It does not resolve the pain of God's actions quickly or neatly. It does not answer all of our questions. It does not communicate things in a way that is tidy or even comfortable. And it does not downplay the significance of the struggle or the pain.

Lamentations is not linear. And that is why I love it. After all, life – yes, even the Christian life – is not always predictable or easy to manage. Suffering, whether innocent or deserved, does not follow a formula, and grief is certainly not tame. The emotions, questions, struggles, fears, and frustrations in the midst of hardship are very real and difficult, at times, to process.

That is why the category of lament is so helpful. It gives voice to those emotions and struggles while directing our thoughts Godward. Lament is inherently Christian because it is a prayer that pours out our heart to God. Lament mourns what has happened, it anchors us in what we believe, and it looks expectantly to the day when God will make all things right.

## Brokenness Leads to Mercy

In chapter one we were introduced to this book and the poetic and graphic description of the fall of the city of Jerusalem. We learned about the devastating consequences of sin, and we ended the service by confessing our sins. In chapter two we saw the bigness of God's righteousness and how He can feel like an adversary when He turns against sin. In chapter three we climbed to the summit of Lamentations, and we saw the hope of new mercies every morning and the confidence in God's faithfulness.

Additionally, we learned that "Great is Thy Faithfulness" is declared while Jerusalem lies in ruins; it is a faith statement. In other words, Jeremiah is lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem AND clinging to what he knows to be true about God. He uses lament to express his sorrow and anchor his hope in God.

However, the book is not finished. We still have two more chapters, and they are not necessarily upbeat. Both chapters four and five contain glimmers of hope – more so that chapters one and two – but they are still dark. The promise of who God is and the pain of life exist together. They are not necessarily reconciled.

Chapter four, in particular, shows us God's mercy that comes after brokenness. The hope of chapter three is still true, but Jeremiah reflects on how broken the people really are. God has deconstructed His people such that their only hope is Him. He has broken them so that he can rebuild them. He has taken away the things that they used as crutches so that they will look to him.

Do you know that the Bible commends this kind of brokenness? Do you know that brokenness can create a God-ordained path to mercy?

*<sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. <sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:16–17)*

*<sup>18</sup> The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. <sup>19</sup> Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. (Psalm 34:18–19)*

*<sup>28</sup> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28–30)*

*<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, <sup>7</sup> casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:6–7)*

By brokenness I mean when God removes the objects of our trust such that we are driven to hope in Him. It is a season where your "crutches" in life have been kicked out, and your only hope is God. Sometimes brokenness can come because of our own sin. Sometimes it can come because of someone else's sin. And it can also come because of the general brokenness in the world. Regardless, the result is the same: brokenness awakens us to our need for God's mercy.

Can you think of a time when God removed some “crutches” in your life? Or maybe the Lord has placed you in a situation or scenario that has become very disappointing, almost like a season in a desert. I hope you will find some hope and spiritual comfort from Lamentations four.

## **A Broken People**

After identifying the faithfulness of God in chapter three, Jeremiah quickly returns to the destruction around him. However, the focal point here is different. Once again there are twenty-two verses, and there is the same poetic structure as the first two chapters with each verse starting with the subsequent Hebrew letter. However, the verses are shorter than the first two chapters. Additionally, chapter four starts with the word “How,” which serves as the thematic title of the book.

The focus is on the brokenness of the people of God and highlights the destruction of the things that they had hoped in before. There is no longer any hope in their culture, their leaders, or in another nation who might come and rescue them. The nation of Israel has nothing to hope in except God. They have been stripped of everything. Let’s see how this plays out:

### **Degraded Culture (vv. 1-11)**

Israel was proud of her status as God’s chosen people. There was something special about the nation, the temple, and their place in the world. But now the glory of Israel has completely faded. The “glory-years” of the past were long-gone. If you have captured a picture of the nation during the reigns of David, Solomon, Hezekiah, or Josiah and then compared it to this scene, it would be utterly shocking. Everything in Israel is inverted and degraded.

The first verse really captures this theme well: “How the gold has grown dim” (4:1). This phrase has two possible meanings. First, since the beauty of the temple was its gold, it could have been a general statement about the city’s destruction.<sup>1</sup> We might say, “*The lights have grown dim in New York City.*” Jerusalem lies in rubble, and her gold (what is left of it) is covered in dirt and dust. The city no longer gleams as a beacon to the world. Second, the gold and the reference to holy stones in verse one could be a figure of speech for the people of Israel. The people once considered themselves to be “gold” and “precious” and the other nations to be of lesser value. So the statement could be communicating the humiliation of the people. The nation of Israel no longer sat in the seat of divine favor. They and their city had grown dim. The people of God had lost their luster.

Verse two seems to point toward the second meaning with the identification of the “*precious sons . . . worth their weight in fine gold . . . are regarded as earthen pots . . .*” (4:2). An earthen pot was the most common of all containers. There was nothing special about an earthen pot. Think about it like you would Tupperware or a Glad-lock freezer bag. Earthen pots are cheap, disposable, and are noted for what they contain, not for the vessel itself. Israel has fallen from a being a valuable family heir-loom to a commonplace vessel. Her stock has tanked.

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<sup>1</sup> R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 21, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 237.

In verses 3-4 we see how cruelly the people of Israel treated each other. Jeremiah appeals to nature, saying that the people treat one another worse than how a jackal would treat its young. He compares the nation to an ostrich who is notorious for leaving her eggs unprotected (see Job 39:13-18). And in verse four we read about children dying of thirst and begging for food, with no one willing to share or help.

The present reality is tragically different than the past. The nation used to feast on delicacies and be clothed in fine garments. But now there is only death and destruction. And while Sodom's destruction was quick, Israel's discipline has been extended much longer. The destruction of Israel was more significant than that of Sodom. Their princes (v. 7) have lost their elevated status and superior lifestyle. No one recognizes them, and they are also ravaged by hunger and thirst (v. 8).

The siege of Jerusalem was devastating. It would have been better to have been killed in battle (v. 9) than to have to endure the suffering of the city. Things became so degraded that mothers turned to cannibalizing their own children. Jeremiah saves this statement as the lowest moment in the description of Jerusalem's suffering.

And why did this all happen? What was the cause of the degradation of the Israel's culture? Verse 11 tells us: God was disciplining His own children for their rebellion. Israel had come apart at the seams. Everything was ruined. The glory days are not just gone; they are dead and buried. Israel, as a people, a nation, and a culture, is lost. They are a broken people.

### **Discredited Leadership (vv. 12-16)**

When people are in crisis, they look to leaders to deliver them, to give them hope, and to lead them to better days. But in verses 12-16 we see that the spiritual leaders of the people have been completely discredited and run off. The people have no confidence in those who used to lead them.

The overthrow of Jerusalem was a shocking turn of events (v. 12), and Jeremiah reminds the reader that a very important reason for this destruction was the failure of spiritual leaders. Verse 13 could not be any clearer:

*<sup>13</sup> This was for the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests, who shed in the midst of her the blood of the righteous. Lamentations 4:13 (ESV)*

The false prophets had not listened to Jeremiah, and they gave the people of Israel a false confidence that they were *not* in grave danger. The people were not taught the law, and they were not rebuked when they fell into sin.<sup>2</sup> The spiritual leaders did not warn the people or call them to repent. What's more, they had been involved in the shedding of innocent blood, likely the murder of prophets whose messages they hated.

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<sup>2</sup> F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 482.

The effect, according to verse 14, was that these spiritual leaders wandered about the streets like blind men, and their garments were so defiled with blood that no one dared come near them. In fact, the people were so repulsed by their leaders that they kicked them out of the city! (v. 15). Don't miss the tragic irony of the words "Away! Unclean! . . . Do not Touch!" being said about the very priests whose role it was to say such words. Their spiritual leaders had been rejected by the people.

And who is behind all of this? What is this happening? Verse 16 tells us very clearly. Once again, it was the Lord's doing.

<sup>16</sup> *The LORD himself has scattered them; he will regard them no more; no honor was shown to the priests, no favor to the elders. Lamentations 4:16 (ESV)*

There is a play on words here that you wouldn't see in English. In Hebrew the word order is "The face of the Lord has dispersed them . . . the face of the priests they have not honored . . ." The very face of the Lord that was promised to bring blessing (e.g., Num. 6:25-26 – ". . . the Lord make his face to shine upon you . . .") is now bringing judgment.<sup>3</sup> And part of that judgment is the rejection of the priests. God's face of judgment has changed what the people saw in the face of their priests.

The culture was degraded. Their leaders were discredited. There is nothing left inside Israel to hope in. Perhaps there was another nation that could help them.

### **Disappointing Neighbors**

Part of Israel's pattern in the past was her quick reliance on neighboring nations to bail her out of her troubles. Time after time the people of God are warned not to put their trust in these nations, but instead to trust in the Lord.

During the siege of Jerusalem, the people hoped that Egypt would come to their defense and end the Babylonian occupation. At one point, the Egyptian army marched close enough to draw some Babylonian forces away (Jeremiah 37:5-8), but any hopes of being rescued by Egypt were quickly dashed. There was no one left to help them. The Babylonian army could not be stopped.

Verses 18-19 describe the terror, fear, and despair that the people felt during the siege and subsequent destruction. Notice phrases like "dogged our steps" and "our days were numbered." Even when Israel cried for help, the Babylonians captured or ambushed them (v. 19). Everything they tried failed.

Even the king was captured. Verse 20 is a reference to King Zedekiah who attempted to escape but was captured. This was the king upon whom the people had placed their hope, even saying, "Under his shadows we shall live among the nations." This statement is yet another sad reminder of how devastated the people were.

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<sup>3</sup> John L. MacKay, *Lamentations: Living in the Ruins*, Mentor Commentaries (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2008), 195.

And then we come to Edom. Verse 21 records this rather odd statement to their southeast. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, and there had been centuries of tension between the two nations. Edom refused to give any aid to Judah during the Babylonian siege and invasion and then gloated in the destruction of Jerusalem.

A lament and imprecatory psalm written during the Babylonian captivity includes a reference to Edom:

*<sup>1</sup> By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. <sup>2</sup> On the willows there we hung up our lyres. <sup>3</sup> For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" <sup>4</sup> How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? <sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! <sup>6</sup> Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! <sup>7</sup> **Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!"** <sup>8</sup> O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! <sup>9</sup> Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! Psalm 137 (ESV)*

The gloating satisfaction of Edom was outrageous to Israel, and an appeal is made to God for the final day of judgment. Verses 21-22 use the following phrases to describe what Israel longs for:

- Judgment - "To you the cup shall pass" (v. 21)
- Shame - "You shall become drunk and strip yourself bare" (v. 21)
- Punishment - "your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish (v. 22)
- Exposure - "he will uncover your sins" (v. 22)

Edom is being warned here that her judgment is yet to come. She has not gotten away with her collusion with Babylon. Edom ought to be warned as she looks at Israel because God is not going to spare her either.

So the people of God have been mocked by their neighbors and have not been helped by any other nation. God has isolated them in their sinfulness and has removed any hope of deliverance from a neighboring nation. In other words, there is no earthly help to them. The nation is without help, both internally and externally.

Do you see how broken the people of God are in chapter four? The entire nation has come apart at the seams, and there is no apparent remedy. God has removed every single crutch that they could rely upon. He has left them with only one hope.

### **A Faithful God**

There are only 19 hopeful words in the entire chapter! But they are there, nonetheless. Let's read them:

*<sup>22</sup> The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer ... Lamentations 4:22 (ESV)*

The only hope or mercy that is offered in this text is simply that God is the one who is behind their judgment and that their future, as a nation, is in God's hand. The NIV renders this verse like this:

*<sup>22</sup> Your punishment will end, Daughter Zion; he will not prolong your exile. But he will punish your sin, Daughter Edom, and expose your wickedness. Lamentations 4:22 (NIV)*

God has so broken them that the only hope that they have is that God will bring an end to their punishment and that their exile will not be prolonged. In other words, the nation is at the mercy of God. And that is not a bad place to be even when life is hard, disappointing, or painful.

God will bring His people back to the promised land. They will remain in exile forever. He will keep his covenant promises to them, and in their brokenness, the faithfulness of God is all that they can hope in.

I don't know where God finds you today. Perhaps you can relate to the picture that we have seen here of the people of God being utterly broken. Maybe you can look at your life and see the ways in which God has removed the crutches of your life. I'm sure there are many people who resonate with the feeling of being "boxed in" by God. You could have thoughts like these:

- I wasn't supposed to still be single at this point.
- My marriage was not supposed to end this way or to be like this.
- My marriage and family were supposed to be more fulfilling.
- I was supposed to have a real career or have figured out what I wanted to do.
- My kids were supposed to turn out differently. I raised them the right way.
- I thought by this point I'd not still be dealing with the same sins or struggles or issues.
- Church ministry was supposed to have a bigger impact on people.

And my prayer is that you will see these situations differently today. My hope is that you'll see that if any of these things led you to be broken such that you have reached out to God for help, while they are painful and hard, they can actually serve a beautiful purpose. Job's suffering led him to see God differently:

*<sup>5</sup> My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. <sup>6</sup> Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." Job 42:5-6 (NIV)*

Brokenness that leads to see God is not wasted. Pain that leads you to trust in God alone is not pointless. The key, however, is whether or not we can embrace the brokenness that God brings because it brings us something better: God Himself.

God broke Israel because her trust was not in Him. He could not allow her to continue the path of rebellion against Him. He loved her too much to allow her to go her own way. You see, this kind of perspective on brokenness changes everything.

It actually makes you thankful that God has leveled you because of what it brought you to. Brokenness leads to mercy, because brokenness leads you to God. And for the believer, that is the greatest treasure of all.

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