

## Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy

The Prayer: "Restore Us, O Lord!"

Lamentations 5

Mark Vroegop

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*<sup>1</sup> Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace! <sup>2</sup> Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to foreigners. <sup>3</sup> We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows. <sup>4</sup> We must pay for the water we drink; the wood we get must be bought. <sup>5</sup> Our pursuers are at our necks; we are weary; we are given no rest. <sup>6</sup> We have given the hand to Egypt, and to Assyria, to get bread enough. <sup>7</sup> Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities. <sup>8</sup> Slaves rule over us; there is none to deliver us from their hand. <sup>9</sup> We get our bread at the peril of our lives, because of the sword in the wilderness. <sup>10</sup> Our skin is hot as an oven with the burning heat of famine. <sup>11</sup> Women are raped in Zion, young women in the towns of Judah. <sup>12</sup> Princes are hung up by their hands; no respect is shown to the elders. <sup>13</sup> Young men are compelled to grind at the mill, and boys stagger under loads of wood. <sup>14</sup> The old men have left the city gate, the young men their music. <sup>15</sup> The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. <sup>16</sup> The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned! <sup>17</sup> For this our heart has become sick, for these things our eyes have grown dim, <sup>18</sup> for Mount Zion which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it. <sup>19</sup> But you, O LORD, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. <sup>20</sup> Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days? <sup>21</sup> Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old— <sup>22</sup> unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us. (Lamentations 5)*

Today is the eighth and final message on the subject of lament, and this message also marks the conclusion of our study of Lamentations. I'm sure that previously Lamentations would not have been on your top 10 books in the canon of Scripture. Now, I'm not sure if it has made it into that category for you, but I at least hope that you love it more today than you did when we started this series.

This series, frankly, has been surprising to me. I approached this study with a bit of apprehension because I knew how dark and foreboding these chapters were. Yet, somehow the Holy Spirit has helped us, taught us some important things, and given us a biblical "place" to be when life is filled with pain.

I want to commend you as a congregation for sticking with this book. I know that many of you were not naturally excited about studying Lamentations, and a few of you even dared to ask me, "How long is this series?" And I knew what you meant in the question. However, one brother slipped this week. When I said, "This coming Sunday is the last message." The word "Good" slipped out before he could stop himself, and then he kindly explained how much the messages meant to him. But I understand. I really do. This series has been heavy, and I have been so encouraged by how you've listened, engaged, asked questions, wrestled with things in your small groups, and even how you've pushed back on a few things. I don't know when or if we'll ever be back to Lamentations. So let me just

remind you how special it is to study the Word together every week. You are a special people, and I'm grateful that you listen so intently. It is a great honor to teach you the Bible week after week.

### **The Value of Lamentations**

We began this series with four key reasons for studying this book. Let me remind you what they were:

- 1) Pain is inevitable, and I want you to be prepared.
- 2) Pain creates strong and scary emotions, and I want you to know what to do with them.
- 3) Sometimes pain does not go away quickly, and I wanted you to see lament is not just a path **to** worship but a path **of** worship.
- 4) Lamenting well provides a great opportunity for evangelism as Christians interpret pain, what lies underneath it, and the ultimate resolution.

I hope that you have discovered a new category for how to deal with the sufferings and difficulties that you will face in your life. I hope you have new language that you can use. I hope you have new kinds of prayers that you can pray and that you are better equipped to help someone when they walk through a season of hardship due to their own sinfulness, the sinfulness of the world, or someone else's sinfulness. I hope that you have learned the language of lament, and I hope that it has caused some of you to become a Christian or to know how to be a Christian in pain or where to take your sorrow over the brokenness of the world.

Over the last eight weeks, we have seen the Lord use particular principles or statements as anchors to our souls. On Tuesdays I meet with a team to discuss the previous sermon and study the next one, and I asked them for a few of the most meaningful thoughts:

- *To cry is human, but to lament in Christian*
- *Lament in not linear*
- *Grace is only amazing because judgment is real*
- *Hope springs from truth rehearsed*
- *To lament is not to be faithless*
- *Waiting is not a waste*
- *Brokenness leads to mercy*

I really hope that the subject of lament, the book of Lamentations, and the Lament Psalms will continue to be a special place for you when difficulties or hardships comes. What's more, these are very interesting times from a cultural standpoint, and I hope this book has given you a place to go when you are anxious, fearful, or even angry. I hope that you have a new category in your soul.

Now you might wonder what is next. Here is the plan: We will take the next two weeks to talk about the church as we launch into our second season of Covenant Renewal and then into THINK with Mark Dever on the subject "Is the Church Still Necessary?" After that we are going to take five weeks to talk about Evangelism and Discipleship with Easter, which is one of our greatest evangelistic opportunities, in middle. And then we will start a new six-week series on Heaven on April 17<sup>th</sup>.

## The Prayers of Lamentations 5

This last chapter of the book of Lamentation is different than the other four. It contains familiar themes about the devastation of the people of Israel, but it is unique. For example, while there are twenty-two verses, they do not follow the pattern of using the Hebrew alphabet as an acrostic. The verses are much shorter, and they are staccato-like in their wording. There is a higher concentration of prayerful statements or requests in chapter five. And it is the most request-oriented chapter in the book.

The fifth chapter is designed to be the conclusion to the book, and it offers the prayerful longing for God to bring about some level of restoration. Now, when we started this series, we worked through 2 Chronicles 36 and the destruction of Jerusalem. In our English Bible, 2 Chronicles follows First and Second Kings, but that was a change that was made in the third century B.C. with the Greek Translation of the Hebrew Old Testament called the Septuagint. The last book in the Hebrew Old Testament was 2 Chronicles, and after the destruction of Jerusalem there was hope.

*<sup>22</sup> Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:<sup>23</sup> "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.'" (2 Chronicles 36:22–23)*

However, the book of Lamentations does not end this way. It ends with three prayers seeking God's help and deliverance with uncertainty as to when or how, or even if, the Lord will answer favorably. I think those three prayers are connected to the use of "O, Lord." We see this in three places:

- 1) *"Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us . . ." (5:1)*
- 2) *"But you, O Lord, reign forever . . ." (5:19)*
- 3) *"Restore us to yourself, O Lord . . ." (5:21)*

You could think of these verses as saying something like "Don't forget our pain!", "But you still reign!", and "We need you desperately." It seems to me that those three statements really serve as a great summary of this book and its message. So let's unpack each of them, and then connect all of this to the gospel.

### ***"Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us . . ." (vv 1-18)***

The first word of chapter five is as important thematically as the first words of chapters 1, 2, and 4. Those earlier chapters began with the word "How," which was meant to communicate an element of shock and outrage at what has happened. Chapter five, as you will see in a moment, has the same level of outrage, but the context for it is different here. In this chapter the expression of outrage has turned to a heart-felt prayer for God to remember what has happened to them.

The word “remember” is very important when it comes to God’s relationship with His people. It captures the essence of God’s grace to His people in how He keeps His covenant with them. Here are a few examples:

- After the judgment of God in the Flood, Genesis 8:1 says that “God remembered Noah . . .”
- In Genesis 9 when God promises to never destroy mankind in a flood again, He said “I will remember my covenant that is between me and you . . . when the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant . . .” (Gen. 9:15-16).
- When the Israelites sinned with the golden calf, Moses pleaded with the Lord to be merciful by remembering His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut. 9:27).
- David cried out to the Lord for mercy in Psalm 25: <sup>6</sup> *Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.* <sup>7</sup> *Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!* (Psalm 25:6–7)

The appeal for God to remember in Lamentations 5 is for God to do more than not forget. The request is for God to deliver His people in light of their disgrace. The leveling of Jerusalem has made them yearn for God’s help. Their pain has turned them to God, asking Him to remember. To ask God to remember is to both acknowledge the pain of what has happened and to look to God for help. “Remember” is a great word in lament. It is a prayerful, faith-filled word for hurting people.

The other important word in verse one is “disgrace.” The word carries with it a sense of blame, being scorned, or casting reproach on someone else. And in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem, they were ashamed because of what had happened to them under divine discipline.

Verses 2-18 catalogue the specifics of what that disgrace looked like. The list is very specific, and that is what makes suffering at any level all the more painful. Pain can feel like “one thing after another.” What we find in these verses is a rapid-fire summary of what the previous four chapters detailed. Let’s look at them quickly.

- Invaded (v 2) – their homes and their country were overrun by a foreign nation.
- Abandoned (v 3) – like an orphan child or a widow after the death of her husband, the nation was alone.
- Economically depressed (v 4) – the economic situation in Israel was terrible and unrelenting.
- Exhausted (v 5) – the constant reality of destruction left them weary and with no rest.
- Dependent (v 6) – the nation had unsuccessfully and unwisely relied on other nations.
- Disciplined (v 7) – they were bearing the consequences of their nation’s rebellion.
- Societal upheaval (v 8) – their society had been completely upended.
- Desperate (v 9) – survival – getting bread – came with the constant threat of danger.
- Sickened (v 10) – hunger and dehydration were taking their toll on the people.
- Assaulted (v 11) – their women were victimized.
- Dishonored (v 12) – their princes and their elders were disrespected, and their positions were not honored.

- Oppressed (v 13) – the people were subjected to forced labor.
- Mourning (v 14-15) – their music had ceased because they had no reason to rejoice anymore.
- Ashamed (v 16) – they had fallen from their prominent position because of their sins.
- Grieved (v 17) – Israel was dealing with the sorrows of their condition.
- Devastated (v 18) – the nation was desolate, such that wild animals had invaded the ruins.

Do you see how the word “disgraced” fits so well here? Everywhere the people looked, there was nothing but destruction. Every aspect of the nation had been affected. Everything was ruined. The nation’s only hope was that God had not forgotten about their plight. They were staking their claim of hope in God’s promise to “remember.”

Two weeks ago our Fighter Verse was Psalm 56:3-4 which is loaded with promises about putting our trust in God. But I also love the parallel verses in Psalm 56:8-11. They combine the hope of trusting God with the assurance that our suffering is not wasted or pointless.

*<sup>8</sup> You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?<sup>9</sup> Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me. <sup>10</sup> In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, <sup>11</sup> in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? (Psalm 56:8–11).*

It is a great hope and a great promise that God sees and knows our tossings and our tears. He has not forgotten. He has not abandoned His people. He is not against them. And chapter five reminds us that there is something enormously comforting about knowing that God knows.

***“But you, O Lord, reign forever . . .” (5:19)***

This is the second prayer connected to the words “O Lord” in chapter five, and its focus is upon the sovereign rule of God over all things, which is really important in light of the description of disaster that is found in verses 1-18. The circumstances of life have a narrative to them. By themselves you might be tempted to draw the conclusion that life is totally out of control, or worse, that God is not ultimately in control.

However, we have heard over and over about the Lord’s direct hand in everything, including the suffering of the people. In chapters one and two we heard statements like these: *“the Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand” (1:14), “he summoned an assembly against me” (1:15), and “the Lord has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud” (2:1).* So while Babylon may be the means of judgment and discipline, it was ultimately God who was behind it. God used a sinful, pagan nation in order to accomplish His divine purposes.

Verse 19 is short, but it is very important. It acknowledges that there is a bigger reality than the suffering and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. Verse 19 is acknowledging God’s supremacy over everything, including pain. It recognizes that the center of the universe is the throne of God.

This is the second “But” statement that represents an important pivot in thinking. The first one was in Lamentations 3:21- *“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope.”* That verse led us to truths that

create hope (“Hope springs from truth rehearsed”). In chapter three it was an invitation to turn from difficult circumstances to the truth about who God is. And in chapter five, the “But” statement is a faith statement about who is really in control of all circumstances. In other words, what you believe about God’s sovereignty and His supremacy really, really matters when life becomes difficult.

Lest you think that this is rare truth found only in Lamentations, look at it in Psalm 102:1-12:

*<sup>1</sup> Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you! <sup>2</sup> Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress! Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call! <sup>3</sup> For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. <sup>4</sup> My heart is struck down like grass and has withered; I forget to eat my bread. <sup>5</sup> Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my flesh. <sup>6</sup> I am like a desert owl of the wilderness, like an owl of the waste places; <sup>7</sup> I lie awake; I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop. <sup>8</sup> All the day my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse. <sup>9</sup> For I eat ashes like bread and mingle tears with my drink, <sup>10</sup> because of your indignation and anger; for you have taken me up and thrown me down. <sup>11</sup> My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass. <sup>12</sup> **But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; you are remembered throughout all generations.** Psalm 102:1–12 (ESV)*

One of the reasons that the sovereignty of God is so important to me, and one of the reasons why it should be important to you, is because without it, suffering is intolerable, pointless, and hopeless. God’s sovereignty doesn’t answer all of our questions – just look verse 20: “Why do you forget us forever?” (Lam. 5:20). But the presence of hard questions does not negate the reality and the hope of God’s rule over all things.

Is there anything going on in your life today for which you need to pray, “But you, O Lord, reign forever!”? Do you find yourself abandoned, depressed, exhausted, desperate, assaulted, oppressed, ashamed, grieved, or devastated? Has your life or some part of it been leveled recently? Are you wondering internally or out loud, “Why do you forsake me for so many days?” If so, I would suggest to you that it would be good for you to join Jeremiah in saying, “But you, O Lord, reign forever.” Fill in this blank: “God, I’m \_\_\_\_\_, but you reign forever!” Oh, how beautiful it is to rest in God’s reign even when your city, your nation, your family, or your life has been leveled.

#### **“Restore us to yourself, O Lord . . .” (5:21)**

The final and closing prayer of Lamentations is an appeal for restoration. The word “restore” means to turn back or to cause to return back to a better position or state. It is the promise that God would bring His people back from their destruction. The word is so important that it is used twice in verse 21. The people desperately needed restoration.

The prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles in Babylon to encourage them to keep following after the Lord. Jeremiah 29 records the message and the hope that was offered to them:

*<sup>10</sup> “For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup>*

*I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. (Jeremiah 29:10–14)*

The hope for the people of Israel was that God would one day bring them back to their land and that He would restore their former glory. But this desire is much more than just a longing for the glory days of David or Solomon or Hezekiah. The restoration of the people of God was primarily about their restoration to God.

You see, more than the loss of the temple, the city, or their identity, the greatest loss was the presence and the blessing of God. That is why Jeremiah 29 talks about seeking the Lord and the people of God finding the Lord again. Their devastation and their loss was designed to awaken their hearts to the greater problem of their sin and their greater need for spiritual restoration. The destruction of the city and temple was orchestrated by God in order to help the people of God realize how far they had fallen and to produce repentance in them.

God delivered them over to their enemies in order to rescue them from themselves. God had humbled them. He had leveled them. He had kicked out every crutch that they had trusted in so that they were desperate. That is why I think the book ends with verse 22.

<sup>22</sup> *unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us. (Lamentations 5:22)*

As best I can tell, the book ends with this kind of tone because 1) the people have been exceedingly humbled and 2) they do not know the full story of God's plans. I do not think that they are questioning God's eventual restoration. The book of Jeremiah promises that restoration frequently. Instead, I think that you find this kind of tone here because the weight of discipline has brought them to a point where even their asking for restoration sounds different.

Note the value of suffering, whether it is innocent or deserved: It changes you deeply. And this is what I hope that Lamentations has done in part for you. I hope that it has changed how you see yourself, the world, the presence of sin, and the brokenness of the culture. I hope it has changed how you see the glory of God, His holiness, and His sovereignty over all things.

Reading a lament or living a lament tunes your heart such that you seek the Lord differently. Lament causes you to look at the circumstances of your life differently – so differently, in fact, that you know it is the Lord who is doing it in you. Lament calls you to see the world through a different lens. That is why “it is good for man to bear the yoke in his youth” (Lam. 3:27). That is why you can be thankful that the Lord leveled you or made you sorrowful, yet always rejoicing (2 Cor. 6:10).

## **The End of Lament**

This brings us to the end of this series, the end of Lamentations, and the conclusion of our study of lament. But before we say goodbye to this book, I want to remind you that the same prophet who recorded the dark words of Lamentations also heralded that there would be day coming when God would deal once and for all with the problem under the problem of Jerusalem's destruction.

Listen to the hopeful words of the prophet Jeremiah as he talked about the coming New Covenant through the Messiah who we know to be Jesus:

<sup>31</sup> *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, <sup>32</sup> not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. <sup>33</sup> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”* Jeremiah 31:31–34 (ESV)

And the prophet Ezekiel said this:

<sup>22</sup> *“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. <sup>23</sup> And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. <sup>24</sup> I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. <sup>25</sup> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.* Ezekiel 36:22–27 (ESV)

How does the gospel relate to lament? Through Christ the problem underneath every problem, our sin, was dealt with such that the New Covenant has been inaugurated. Christ’s death brought the end of condemnation, judgment, and God’s wrath. Christ’s death and resurrection made it possible for us to be born again and for Christ’s Spirit to dwell in us. So while we still live in a broken world, we look forward to the promise in God’s word that one day all lamenting will cease.

<sup>3</sup> *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”* Revelation 21:3–4 (ESV)

To cry is human, but to lament is Christian -- but not forever. Jesus bought our restoration, and one day soon, He will bring an end to our lament! Even so come, Lord Jesus!

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