

How many of you remember where you were seven years ago on this date, on the morning of May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013? Unfortunately, I do. On this date, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013, I awoke to a call from one of our elders that a family in our church had awoken to find their 4 month-old son unresponsive in his crib. I remember rushing to the hospital to find baby Henry lying on the bed, with his devastated parents by his bedside. We cried and pleaded for God to bring Henry back to life, but he was gone.

I thought about Henry this week as I prepared for this sermon, the third in my sermon series I am doing on suffering, loss, lament, and trust. Certainly we are going through a season of suffering and loss as a world, as a country, and for most of us, individually as well, and **if somehow you've escaped suffering, well, just give it time** and suffering will come your way, because it's inescapable in this life. Fortunately for us, the Bible gives us a pattern of prayer known as lament that is meant to help us to process our pain in a way that leads us to a better state of mind and soul. I recognize that not everyone listening to me even believes that God is real; some of you may be just trying to figure things out, or just hear to learn, and that is okay. I would ask you to just consider this morning the Biblical path of lament as a way to lead ourselves through suffering and loss to a better place for our mind, body, and soul. In this series, I'm using Mark Vroegop's definition of lament as **"a prayer in pain that leads to trust."** Two weeks ago, we looked at Psalm 13, which gives us a good, brief model of what a prayer of lament looks like.

As we saw in that Psalm, lament consists of four movements: turn to God, voice your complaint, ask boldly, and choose to trust. You can think of it almost as a decision tree. **In movement one**, as you experience suffering, you have a choice to either turn to God or away from Him. **In movement two**, you can either suck it up and pretend all is fine, or you can give full vent to all your emotions. **In movement three**, you can either accept what is happening as your fate, or ask God to act, to bring justice, to show up, to move, to do be act according to His character. And **in movement four**, you can either get swallowed up by your despair, or you can choose to trust that God is good, that He is sovereign, that He loves you.

Last week we looked at Job, a long example of someone lamenting through terrible suffering. We learned from Job how a few things that can help us to trust in God are recognizing that God's perspective is much bigger than ours, that God is able to use all the evil and suffering we experience and bring good out of it, and that the one to whom Job points, Jesus, suffered and actually was forsaken by God the Father on the cross as He died for us.

This week we are going to look at the longest lament in the Bible, which is found in the book of Lamentations. My plan this morning is to look at how the four movements of lament show up in Lamentations and what we learn from them, and then to focus on one specific kind of suffering that is the focus of this book.

I'm assuming most of you have not spent much time in this book, as it is not an uplifting book that would regularly show up in your devotional reading, except for a couple of verses in the middle of the book. Lamentations is five chapters long. It is basically five poems written in the style of funeral poems, written in response to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. After a three year siege, the Babylonian armies breached the city walls, destroyed the temple and the city, and carried off many of the inhabitants into exile as slaves. Legend is that Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah as he watched the city burning, although it may be a compilation of other poets who wrote as they witnessed their home being destroyed.

Lamentations is unique in that it contains both individual and corporate lament. In other words, the poets are lamenting both their own personal suffering and the suffering and destruction of the nation. Remember the first two movements of lament: Turn to God and pour out your complaint. We see this clearly in Lamentations, where once again the poets are brutally honest in expressing their hurt, anger, disappointment, and sadness to God. In chapter 3, there is an individual lament that sounds very much like the laments we have read in the Psalms and in Job, as the poet accuses God of oppressing him:

*I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. <sup>2</sup> He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; <sup>3</sup> indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. <sup>4</sup> He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. <sup>5</sup> He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. <sup>6</sup> He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. <sup>7</sup> He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. <sup>8</sup> Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. <sup>9</sup> He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. <sup>10</sup> Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, <sup>11</sup> he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. <sup>12</sup> He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. <sup>13</sup> He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. <sup>14</sup> I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. <sup>15</sup> He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall. <sup>16</sup> He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. <sup>17</sup> I have been deprived of peace; I have*

forgotten what prosperity is. <sup>18</sup> So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD."

Once again, look at how brutally honest this poet is as he prays. This is very important for you to hear, because some of you believe that it is disrespectful to be this honest before God, that He does not want to hear your complaining. Far from it – God wants you to bring your whole heart to Him, even your deepest pain and accusations. Because as you bring it to Him, He can help you to eventually turn to trust.

In chapters 1, 2 4, and 5, there is corporate lament as the writers lament the fall of their city.

Listen to this corporate lament:

***Lamentations 1:1-6** - How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. <sup>2</sup> Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are upon her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is none to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies. <sup>3</sup> After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile. She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place. All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress. <sup>4</sup> The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her maidens grieve, and she is in bitter anguish. <sup>5</sup> Her foes have become her masters; her enemies are at ease. The LORD has brought her grief because of her many sins. Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe. <sup>6</sup> All the splendor has departed from the Daughter of Zion.*

***Lamentations 2:11**- My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city.*

The poet pours out his grief at seeing the destruction of his city, at seeing the enemies overtake them. The closest most of us have experienced to this is 9/11. There's a date that many of you remember where you were and the shock and anguish you felt upon seeing the towers collapse. We see here the importance of lamenting together when suffering happens, and remembering it regularly.

Closer to the end of his lament, he turns to the third movement, asking the Lord to remember and to restore:

**Lamentations 5:1-3** - *Remember, O LORD, what has happened to us; look, and see our disgrace. <sup>2</sup> Our inheritance has been turned over to aliens, our homes to foreigners. <sup>3</sup> We have become orphans and fatherless, our mothers like widows.*

**Lamentations 5:21-22** - *Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old <sup>22</sup> unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure.*

He wants the Lord to come to their help and restore them to a right relationship with God, so that they could return to their land.

In every lament comes the “vav”, the “yet” or “but.” In Lamentations, it comes in 3:21, the fourth movement, when the poet **chooses to trust in God** in the midst of the devastation:

*<sup>19</sup> I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. <sup>20</sup> I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. <sup>21</sup> Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; <sup>26</sup> it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

Some of you may be familiar with this passage, mainly because it's the only obviously hopeful verses in the whole book. But I hope you are seeing that when you take it out of its context, you lose something very important. **You usually see this with some beautiful background (slide).** But this is not a poet writing these words from a Starbucks, sipping his latte, or from the palace, living in comfort and safety. This is a man watching the destruction of his city, watching a foreign country taking his neighbors off into slavery, wondering how God could let this happen, pouring out his hurt, his anger, and his fears to God, choosing instead of despair to trust that God is who He claims to be, and that His love and faithfulness are still worth trusting in. That even though things look bleak, he will still wait for the salvation of the Lord.

So those are the four movements of lament in Lamentation. **But there is a specific aspect of the suffering found in Lamentations that I want to focus on this morning.** One of the unique aspects of Lamentations is that the poet knows that as terrible as the fall of Jerusalem is, that what makes it worse is that it could have been avoided

if they had only turned away from their sins and walked in holiness before God. The poet knows that what is happening is not unjust suffering like what Job experienced, but is **God's discipline on them for their sins**.

***Lamentations 2:1-5** - How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion with the cloud of his anger! He has hurled down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. <sup>2</sup> Without pity the Lord has swallowed up all the dwellings of Jacob; in his wrath he has torn down the strongholds of the Daughter of Judah. He has brought her kingdom and its princes down to the ground in dishonor. <sup>3</sup> In fierce anger he has cut off every horn of Israel. He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy. He has burned in Jacob like a flaming fire that consumes everything around it. <sup>4</sup> Like an enemy he has strung his bow; his right hand is ready. Like a foe he has slain all who were pleasing to the eye; he has poured out his wrath like fire on the tent of the Daughter of Zion. <sup>5</sup> The Lord is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel. He has swallowed up all her palaces and destroyed her strongholds. He has multiplied mourning and lamentation for the Daughter of Judah.*

The poet knows that they God has allowed this calamity to befall them because they have turned away from God and refused to repent. He knows that it is their national sin, their idolatry and injustice that Jeremiah and other prophets have been confronting, that has led to their predicament. Israel has told God basically that they want to live without Him, and God has allowed it.

**What I want you to know as you read Lamentations is that sometimes, not always, our suffering is a result of God's discipline for our sins. Sometimes, as in the case of Job, our suffering has absolutely nothing to do with our sin, but is an attack of the enemy, or a result of living in a broken world, or is the result of someone else's sin.** But other times, as we pour out our complaint to God, we recognize that we are in the situation we are in because of our sins, our rebellion against God, and that God has allowed the suffering into our lives to discipline us, as a consequence that steers us away from self-destruction. Listen to the writer of Hebrews:

**Hebrews 12:4-12** - *In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup> And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, <sup>6</sup> because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." <sup>7</sup> **Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? <sup>8</sup> If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes***

discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. <sup>9</sup> Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! <sup>10</sup> *Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. <sup>11</sup> No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.*

Notice that God's discipline comes from a place of love, in the same way that a loving parent will discipline their children. And the goal, he says, is that we may share in his holiness. God's goal for our lives is not our happiness but our holiness, just as the goal of a parent is not to always make their child happy but to make them mature. As Paul writes:

***1 Thessalonians 4:3-7** - It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, <sup>5</sup> not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; <sup>6</sup> and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. <sup>7</sup> For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.*

It is God's will that you should be sanctified – made holy. To be holy is to be set apart to God, distinct from the world, living for God's kingdom and for His will. And God can use suffering to discipline us towards holiness

Think about parenting. I want my children to be happy. But I do not believe happiness comes by giving them everything they want. Children are born sinful and self-centered, and so true happiness and maturity will not come from letting them do whatever they want; that will only produce self-centered adults. True happiness will come through disciplining them towards maturity. That will mean that if they lie, I will punish them. Otherwise, they will become liars. If they steal, they will be punished. Otherwise, they will learn that stealing is okay. As a good parent, I will bring painful consequences to bear on their lives in order to discipline them towards maturity. **And what child ever thanks you for your wise discipline? No – they think it is too much, for too long.** No discipline is pleasant at the time, but it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace.

In the same way, we are far from perfect. God on the cross has saved us from the penalty of our sins. And now he is working to save us from the power of sin in our life, because it is still working to destroy us. This is what the Bible calls sanctification. **And God will use the suffering in our lives to discipline us towards holiness.** And since it just feels like suffering to us, we will not understand why God is allowing it to happen. But sometimes, as we lament, we realize that our suffering is a consequence of our sin, and that God is allowing that suffering like a good parent, so that we might turn back to Him, like the poet of Lamentations realized.

Elisabeth Elliot, a prominent Christian writer and speaker in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tells of visiting friends of hers in northern Wales who owned a sheep farm. She shared about how the sheep are vulnerable to being eaten to death by insects and parasites, and so once every year, the shepherd has to take his sheep to a huge vat of antiseptic and completely submerge his sheep. The farmer, in order to save his sheep from death, has to actually hold his sheep underwater in the antiseptic until they have been disinfected. As Elliot put it:

*One by one John seized the animals. They would struggle to climb out the side and Mack the sheep dog would snarl and snap at their faces to force them back under. When they tried to climb up the ramp in a panicky way at the far end, John the farmer would catch them, spin them around, force them under again, holding them ears, eyes and nose submerged for a few seconds.*

*And as their lord and master was pushing their head under, drowning them at least as far as they could tell, their panicky little eyes would look up over the edge of the vat, and it was easy to see what they were thinking. What is god doing?*

Reflecting on that experience, Elliot continued:

*I've had some experiences in my life which have made me feel very sympathetic to those poor sheep. There are times I couldn't figure out any reason for the treatment I was getting from my great shepherd whom I trusted. And like these sheep I didn't have a hint of an explanation.*

**Sometimes, God can allow suffering into our lives as discipline in order to save us from our sin, so that it does not kill us.** It may be painful at the time, but in the long

run will serve to make us people of greater patience and compassion, deeper character. He wants to save you from your apathy, your self-centeredness, your anger, your jealousy, your laziness. He wants to deliver you from trusting in the things of this world that can not save you and will not give you what your heart is looking for. It's important to recognize that those who have never struggled tend to be more arrogant and self-centered. Those who have suffered often have more depth of character to them.

And think of physical disciplines such as exercise. When you are suffering, you feel like you're getting weaker, but you're actually getting stronger. Just like in the gym.

CS Lewis, in his book *The Problem of Pain*, famously said, "God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Suffering can be used by God to wake us up and to discipline us towards holy lives, if we will let him.

The book of Lamentations shows us a grim example of how when we continue to rebel against God, God allows us to face the consequences of our actions. Not because he is mean or vindictive, but because He is a perfectly loving parent who wants life, maturity, holiness, and lasting happiness for us. And so, if we are going the opposite direction, he will often discipline us by allowing us to face the consequences of our action. As we pour out our heart in lament, one of the things that can help us to trust God is to know that he sometimes uses suffering to discipline us for our holiness.

So what do you do when you realize your suffering is actually discipline from God? In Lamentations, the poet recognizes that their suffering is ultimately self-inflicted and is the discipline of God for their sins, and he calls upon the nation to turn from their sin and repent, to get right with God:

**Lamentations 3:39-42** - *Why should any living man complain when punished for his sins? <sup>40</sup> Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD. <sup>41</sup> Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: <sup>42</sup> "We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven.*

We turn to God because we know that God is merciful, a loving parent:

**Lamentations 3:31-33** - *For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. <sup>32</sup> Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. <sup>33</sup> For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.*

Why can God restore those who are not holy? How can a holy God not hold it against them forever? He can restore because Jesus took the ultimate punishment.

**Lamentations 1:12** - *"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me, that the LORD brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?"*

This verse points us to the day of all days, when God the Father poured out His fierce anger, His wrath on human sin, on His Son on the cross. In Lamentations, God knew that his people were heading for disaster, and so in order to rescue them, he had to allow his own beloved city, his own temple, to be destroyed. It was the only way to save his people. This points us Romans

**Romans 8:31-32** - *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

God saw us in our sin, headed for eternal disaster, and so in order to rescue us, he had to allow his beloved Son to be destroyed, to die in our place. It was the only way to save us.

And so we can trust God, that even when he bring suffering in our lives to discipline us, it is for our good, to save us.

<sup>19</sup> *I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. <sup>20</sup> I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. <sup>21</sup> Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. <sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." <sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; <sup>26</sup> it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

We do not need to be swallowed up by despair, because God is faithful, and full of great love. It is good to wait for His salvation.

Write your own lament. Pour out your heart, ask boldly, and choose to trust.